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OR, THE BRANDED FACE.

A Wild Romance of the Sierras.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CALIFORNIA CLAUDE," "FLASH
DAN," "COOL CONRAD," "DENVER DUKE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SLIPPING THE LEASH.

SACRAMENTO at night.
The streets are thronged with people, and the
lamps throw their brilliant light everywhere.
It is a midsummer night of a year that has
lately moved into the past.
People of every description jostle the stranger
as he moves about, men fresh from the moun-
tain mines, gamblers, Mexicans, old 'forty-
niners, half-breeds, Indians and women.
One would think that the Wild West had come
bodily to Sacramento.
Everywhere is heard the clink of glasses, for
the saloons keep open doors, and the wild, coarse
laugh of the rough, and the hoarse oaths of the
whisky slave come out to pollute the air.

"I HOLD IN MY HAND," THE STRANGE WOMAN SAID, "THE SOLITARY KEY OF THE BIGGEST BONANZA
THAT EVER EXISTED. DARE YOU, KEEN KENNARD, UNDERTAKE THE SEARCH?"

It is not the Sacramento of to-day, perhaps, but thousands who still inhabit it, were there the night that witnesses the opening of our story.

It is a night that inaugurates a new gambling-den, and witnesses the drawing of the famous El Dorado lottery.

These two events help to make Sacramento livelier than usual; they form two themes for conversation, and everywhere they are discussed.

The night is one of matchless beauty; myriads of stars about a full moon that sails the skies like a full-rigged ship; soft winds and balmy air.

While the streets were witnessing the scenes just described, a man was walking the floor of a certain room in the best quarter of the city.

He would have attracted attention in any part of the world, and among the most common occurrences, not on account of his garments, which were plain, but because of his build and looks.

In stature he was faultless, six feet tall, and molded like an Adonis. He had a splendid breadth of shoulders, an expansive chest, and magnificent limbs.

An observer at a first glimpse would have exclaimed: "That man has the strength of an ox!"

His face was smoothly-shaven and fresh from a razor; his eyes were rather large, intensely black, and penetrating. He wore a good deal of hair as black as his eyes, and it almost touched his shoulders.

He walked the little room from window to window with much impatience. A certain manner told that he was not in his own house, and it was evident that he was waiting for some one.

More than once he glanced at the door that seemed to open into the street beyond, and once or twice his lips unclosed to mutter something in a fretful way.

His hat, a big, broad-brimmed, dark sombrero, occupied the chair upon which he had doubtless cast it upon entering the room. It seemed as little at home as its owner.

This man, who was not more than thirty-five, was not a citizen of Sacramento; he had the air of a free mountain rover about him; he looked like a man who could tell of more wild trails than one.

At last the door opened and found him on his ceaseless tramp from window to window.

He looked up, and in a moment had covered the person who had entered.

"I beg pardon, I am late; it was not my fault," said the new-comer, in a musical voice, which stirred the fringe of the black mask she wore.

The man had stopped and was looking at her, strangely interested; he had not expected to see one whose face was hidden.

"Aha! you didn't expect to see a mask when you came here from Shasta!" continued the woman, laughing.

"That is true; I certainly did not."

"You are Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow?"

"Men call me that sometimes."

"You look like a human sleuth-hound. They say you have never failed to unravel a mystery."

"I don't know about that," answered Kennard, smiling faintly. "We all fail sometimes."

"But you never do. Ah! I have heard, you see!"

He did not reply, but looked down into the brilliant eyes that shone behind the eyelets of the silken mask.

"I didn't more than half expect you," the woman went on. "You got my message?"

"Yes."

"You did not know who Queen Moro was?"

"No."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because you sent for me."

The woman seemed to start at the tone in which the reply was spoken.

"Yes, I did send for you!" she exclaimed, glancing furtively about the room. "I have shadow work for you, Keen Kennard. I can send you on the strangest and biggest trail of your life. I can confront you with a mystery that will challenge your bravery and enchain your attention from the beginning. But I say here that if you refuse to go, you can now retreat. When once you have promised, I expect you to go on to the end."

"I am here to work. I like to unravel mysteries. Show me this great trail, as you call it. There never was a time when danger made Kennard back out."

Keen Kennard spoke the last sentence with a show of pride.

"Go you shall, then!" cried the masked woman. "You must leave Sacramento to-night—right away."

"I have nothing to tie me here."

Gazing wonderingly at the cool man, the woman went to a handsome bureau that occupied one corner of the room, unlocked one of the drawers and took out a paper, and returning to the man, who had watched her closely, she held the folded document before him.

"I hold in my hand," the strange woman said, "the solitary key of the biggest bonanza that ever existed. Dare you, Keen Kennard, undertake the search?" and she eyed him searchingly.

"Dare I?" was the half-sarcastic answer. "Keen Kennard dares do anything that is legitimate work for a detective."

She smiled. "As I knew," she went on. "Well, as to this paper: it is the work, in disjointed sentences of a mad and dying man—the last of a band of five who had found somewhere—God knows where—a bed of gold that outshines the wealth of Ophir. Ten years ago five men left Gold Gorge Camp in search of what many called a myth—a mine somewhere in the depths of the Sierra Nevada. I know they found it. I would not have sent for you, Keen Kennard, if those five men had failed. After three years, the youngest of the band, a mere youth, came back to Gold Gorge camp. He was a pitiable object, a mere skeleton, starved, and raving crazy. Of course he created a sensation. Three years in the mountains! Think of it! For awhile nobody believed his ravings; he had spells of sanity, but then he was generally morose and silent. At last the men who watched him began to catch glimpses of the past. They believed that the five men had found the great bonanza of the Sierras. Sentence by sentence Gilbert Golden put together when he thought he was not watched. At times he would write on slips of paper which he secreted in different places.

"I hold those papers in my hand. No matter how they fell into my power, Keen Kennard. They are here! One year after Gilbert's return to Gold Gorge he mysteriously disappeared. Nobody seemed to know what had become of him. Men said that he had wandered away during one of his mad spells. Some laughed, and wondered if he hadn't gone back to the new Ophir—to the mountain mine. In less than one month Gold Gorge camp did not have a single inhabitant. Every one was hunting Gilbert Golden. Here! look at these papers."

The woman, who ceased rather abruptly, laid the papers in Keen Kennard's hand. Their touch seemed to send a thrill to the Shasta detective's heart.

"You will find a rude—a very rude—diagram on one of the slips," she went on. "You may discover what it means. The sentences read like the utterances of a madman, but they are just what crazy Gilbert Golden wrote. A part of the mystery is, that, since the men of Gold Gorge started after him, not one of them has been seen."

The Sierra detective walked to the little stand on which a lamp burned, and began to examine the papers.

"I have found the right man!" the masked woman murmured while she eyed him. "If I had scoured California I could not have found a better tool. It was a lucky day when I heard of the Shasta Shadow. He will find this mine—he will come back and lay its wealth at my feet; then—then! by the eternal heavens! I will be somebody once more. Then I can doff this silk mask, and make my enemies tremble. I feel like thanking heaven for sending me Keen Kennard!"

The man from Shasta looked at the papers one by one, and laid them on the table as they were scrutinized.

He gave the rude diagram—a jumbled mass of lines and figures—but a single glance, then, straightening suddenly, he turned upon the waiting and almost breathless woman.

"It's a pretty big job," he observed, with a smile.

"You refuse, then?" she exclaimed, darting forward.

"Did I say so?" he asked, meeting her with a look that checked her in an instant.

"No, but—"

"You feared I would, eh? What am I to have if I find this mine—if I ferret out the lost man of Gold Gorge Camp and get at the secret?"

"The world, almost!" cried the masked woman. "My God! Keen Kennard! throw the key to this bonanza at my feet, and any reward you ask shall be yours. I dare you to the trial! I can only say that it exists somewhere among the Sierras. It may be guarded by the bowies of the men of Gold Gorge Camp. I will conceal nothing from you. The mine exists. You see it by the papers you have read."

"Who are you, woman?" he suddenly asked. "Let me look under this piece of silk and see who sends Kennard, the Shasta Shadow upon this strange trail."

His hand moved toward the silken mask as he finished; but the woman recoiled with a quivering cry.

"No! Not for all California!" she exclaimed. "Find the bonanza, and then see me unmask! You may know me as Queen Moro. To you I am no one else now. Aha! Keen Kennard, brave as you are, you are appalled by the task I throw at your feet! Men have lied to me about you, after all. I am disappointed. Queen Moro must look elsewhere for her bonanza pilot. Good-night!"

Waving her hand at the astonished man, the

woman turned toward the door as if about to leave him without further ceremony.

"Hold on!" he cried, and a bound carried him to her side. "I don't know who you are. I don't care! Witch, devil, or sorceress! you shall never laugh Keen Kennard down! Though your mine be beyond a barrier of death I will find it. I will find the trail of the lost man of Gold Gorge Camp, and follow it to the end! You shall know that I am Keen Kennard the Shasta Hound—the man who never turns back from a trail!"

She looked up into his face, her own black eyes full of fire and triumph.

"Dare you swear that?"

"I dare! Here in the sight of Heaven—"

At that moment the door flew open, and with a wild cry a beautiful young girl sprung into the room.

"No! no! don't take an oath which you can never, never keep!" she cried. "There is no lost mine—it is a myth, and Gilbert—oh, God! he is lost, lost, forever!"

Keen Kennard turned upon the girl and saw Queen Moro spring at her with the ferocity of a tigress.

"Don't mind this child!" said the masked woman, clutching the girl madly, and forcing her back. "She is as mad as the youth of Gold Gorge was. Now, Keen Kennard, finish your oath!"

The fair young girl seemed to wither in the clutch of the silken mask; she appeared powerless to speak, and quailed under the woman's glance.

"I swear to find it!" said the man from Shasta. "In the sight of Heaven, Queen Moro, I swear to throw this lost El Dorado at your feet if it really exists. I am Keen Kennard, who always finds!"

"Go, then! To the new Ophir!"

The girl's lips parted to murmur in a gasp:

"And to death!"

Keen Kennard did not hear. He seized his hat, waved his hand, and sprung away.

"It is the strangest mission of my life," he said. "But by the eternal stars! the Shadow will find the substance, if it is in the Sierras. I'll begin right away!"

CHAPTER II.

THE ALCALDE OF RED EYE BAR.

THE summer had passed and the slopes of the Sierra were taking on the rich tints of autumn. Life was busy there, as in the populous cities of the coast, and the ring of the miner's pick came up from the depths of the gold hills which his adventurous spirit was exploring.

In the deepest depths of the Sierra Nevada, from the foot of Mount Shasta to the southernmost limits of the gold range men toiled for the yellow ore. Camps sprung into existence like magic, and passed out of it like the dying of a flash.

Man hunted man as much almost as he hunted gold; the mining-camps were, for the most part, settlements that knew no law, and the little they did know was that dealt out by the pistol and noose of the Vigilantes.

The alcaldes of the camps were often men who dealt out questionable justice for the furtherance of certain schemes of their own, and it is not surprising that in many places throughout the sierra, there was a reign of terror.

Woman seldom penetrated to these "buried camps," as they were sometimes called. The men tigers had it all their own way.

Now and then, however, the face of a member of the softer sex would appear in camp, but it always turned out to be the face of some characterless adventuress, who had turned her back forever upon refinement.

There were a few women who rejoiced in the appellation of sorceress, and they generally ran things with a high hand in their peculiar and mysterious calling. They sometimes seemed to hold a spell of enchantment over the superstitious denizens of the camps they affected, and where some of their "guesses" came true, they wielded a mighty power.

At the foot of a lofty mountain wooded almost to the very peak stood a collection of little cabins which rejoiced in the name of Red Eye Bar.

Its very existence was hardly known twenty miles away, and it was said to be a camp completely "buried."

The cabins, or log shanties, twelve in number and exactly alike, fronted to the south, or away from the mountain, so that Red Eye Bar had but one street, and that one with the houses all on one side.

There were no signs of mining about this strange place, though its surroundings looked auriferous. The mountains and the gulches invited gold-hunters, but the keenest eye could not see where a pick had struck.

In the center of the camp and in front of a cabin stood a pole about ten feet high and nailed to it at the top was a pine board bearing this legend:

"THIS IS RED EYE BAR!

GET OUT O' HERE!"

A single glance at the camp was almost enough to warn the stranger that it would be

best for him to obey the command without civil. An acquaintance with the citizens might not prove desirable.

Red Eye Bar was the home, small as it was, of one of these mountain sorceresses of whom I have spoken.

This woman from some unknown cause bore the name of Vera the Viper, but she did not look like a serpent.

Dropshot Bluff, the self-constituted alcalde of the camp, had his cabin close to hers, but there existed between the two a singular aversion which seemed greatest on the woman's part.

The alcalde had roughed it over a great part of the gold lands, he could relate stories of wild personal adventure in California, New Mexico and Utah. The latter place he always touched sparingly.

It was said that Dropshot Bluff had once been a Mormon elder, that for some crime he had been banished from the territory, and that on pain of death he had ever feared to return.

Certain it was that he did not look like a Mormon elder while he performed the duties of alcalde of Red Eye Bar.

He had the frame of a giant, the bronzed face of a plainsman, the nature and quickness of a tiger-cat.

He watched Vera the Viper whenever he saw her, and this was almost every day. He always saw a woman who seemed to have reached her thirty-fifth year, a woman with a graceful figure, very keen black eyes and close-cut hair. Her close-fitting dress reached midway between knee and ankle, and she wore a hat very like a soft sombrero. It had a bit of lace for a ribbon, and helped to give her a romantic appearance.

She had been the sorceress of Red Eye Bar for three years when we introduce her to the reader, and in that time, singular to relate, she had never been on familiar terms with the alcalde.

"They're like oil an' water—they don't mix," the men had said a thousand times, and then they invariably fell to wondering what kept Dropshot Bluff and Vera apart.

Was she a spy to watch the Utah exile and the camp he inhabited? Was her calling of sorceress but a cloak to cover some deep design against the men of Red Eye Bar?

She never replied to the insinuations the mountain band threw out; she came and went when and where she pleased, and, brave as the roughs were, there was not one bold enough to question her.

It was night in the middle of the autumn that followed the sending of Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow, upon the mysterious trail of the lost Ophir, and the alcalde of Red Eye Bar had shut his shanty door to seek the little cot that occupied one corner of his cabin.

"Another night hyer an' I'm no nearer the big stake than I war at mornin'," he muttered. "Pshaw! I've said this a thousand times, an' I don't push things I'm liable ter say it a thousand times more. Hades an' horns! am I afraid ov that woman who watches me an' Red Eye Bar like a hawk? Jerusalem! why don't I bring matters ter a crisis? If I could throw ther young chap back inter insanity, I might pick up a clew, but I can't work while she's hyer!"

Dropshot Bluff stood in the light of the lamp on his table.

His eyes flashed while he spoke.

"Why don't ye do it, Bluff?" he asked himself in a bantering manner. "Look at ther back-in' ye've got—eighteen of ther best blades in California, an' each one wielded by a master ov ther art. Yet, hyer yer stan', an' let ther sorceress hev her way. What an' yer alcalde for? Ye'd better be citizen!"

He talked himself into a frenzy of passion; he was getting ready to froth at the mouth when he concluded.

"In this ther year ov our Lord eighteen hundred an' seventy-nine, I'll break ther chain thet chains ther tigers ov Red Eye Bar!" he suddenly went on. "We've given up Gold Gorge Camp for this mountain tomb; we mustn't be driven from hyer by a creature thet pretends ter commune with spirits an' ther dead. By heavens! no! I tell'er so afore ther swiftest star makes another mile!"

He had no preparations to make, for the alcalde of Red Eye was always armed. He merely glanced at the revolvers he carried in his belt and stepped out into the night.

Red Eye Bar seemed to have sought repose. Here and there a dim light was visible where the solemn cabins stood, and the few stars that twinkled far above the mountain-top showed Dropshot Bluff the merest outlines of the shanties.

He had left his cabin with a well-formed determination. The presence of Vera the Viper in Red Eye must come to an end, and the alcalde was the man to say so.

He did not pretend to know where she had come from, he saw in her a check to him, he would not have stopped to have called her a spy.

Determined to put an end to her rule, he walked toward her cabin which, as has already been said, was near his own.

No light in the little window to the right of

the door told Dropshot Bluff that the cabin was inhabited. He had doubtless caught the sorceress of the sierra asleep.

The alcalde of Red Eye advanced to the door and halted there. "I'll be polite," he said, with a smile. "I'll knock."

Up went his big bronzed hand and the knuckles were about to fall upon the door when a voice from the inside said:

"Come in."

Dropshot Bluff recoiled in spite of himself, for the summons without the knock seemed to confirm the supernatural powers of the sorceress of the camp.

The big alcalde took a long breath before he recovered and went forward again.

"What's ther matter?" he exclaimed. "Ef she's in league with sperits, they've told her thet I war comin'—thet's all." And he lifted the wooden latch and opened the door.

Dropshot Bluff found himself on the inside of a cabin he had never entered before. It was almost dark, and in the uncertain light he ran against a table.

"It is I—Dropshot, ther alcalde," he said. "You will pardon this night call, Vera, but I'm hyer on very important business."

"The man at the table will talk to you," was the reply, but the speaker the alcalde did not see.

"A man ahead ov me?—a man transactin' business for Vera ther Viper in Red Eye? Who is he? By the livin' soul! I'll transact my business with her!"

The alcalde's mutterings were brought to an abrupt ending by the appearance of a light which a dim hand placed on the table.

"There's your man, Dropshot," said the same voice.

The alcalde of Red Eye Bar looked once across the table and then uttered a most startling cry.

Yes, there was a man at the table, but such a man! Once the agent of the sorceress had moved and had a being, but now the object the alcalde saw was a whitened and grinning skeleton, with one bony hand lying on the table, and the other raised, with a bit of paper between the fleshless fingers!

It was a horrible sight, and one strange enough to drive every vestige of color from the face of Dropshot Bluff.

The skeleton was seated in the rough chair drawn close to the table, and the terrible face of death was turned full upon the alcalde.

"Go up and take the paper he offers you," said the woman whose outlines Dropshot Bluff now saw for the first time since entering the cabin. "He will introduce himself. Aha! are you afraid, alcalde of Red Eye?"

"No, but I came hyer ter see you!" was the answer.

"Take his paper, I say."

Biting his lip, Dropshot Bluff came forward and picked the folded paper from between the skeleton fingers; then, leaning toward the lamp, he unfolded it.

Watched intently by the woman in her corner, the alcalde of Red Eye read the following lines which were traced on the slip:

"I am Max Mogalle, one of Gilbert Golden's five companions. I died at the mouth of the lost Ophir. When are you going back to Utah, Buckshot Bluff?"

"When I want ter!" cried the alcalde dropping the paper and turning upon the sorceress. "This is one ov yer tricks," he went on. "Yer can't stuff this Californy chick with the story thet thet skeleton thar war once Max Mogalle, an' thet he died whar thet paper says. It's an infamous lie! Who found ther skeleton at ther door of ther lost bonanza? Thar war a Max Mogalle in ther party thet hunted years for ther mine, an' they all died but ther starved an' crazy boy who came back ter Gold Gorge Camp. See hyer! We want no more tricks like this in Red Eye. I came hyer ter say that yer reign ends ter-night. I don't talk ter dead men. My business is with you."

"No; you deal with Max Mogalle," said Vera. "Listen, Dropshot Bluff. He is going to talk to you." The next moment the hand of the skeleton was lifted till it covered the alcalde of Red Eye, and the lower jaw dropped with a ghostly sound: "To you, Buckshot Bluff, and to your pards, the riches of the lost Ophir are lost forever!" issued from the mouth of the skeleton in sepulchral tones. "You can choose your place to die—among the wild trails of the Sierra, or where you committed that unearthly crime which drove you from Mormondom. The way to the lost mine is the way to death! The alcalde and his gold pards are doomed. I am Max Mogalle. The hand that would force from Gilbert Golden the secret he holds, shall be picked by the vultures of the Sierra. Be warned in time, alcalde!"

"Oh! hades!" roared the alcalde, flushing madly. "We ar' goin' ter get thar! Ten minutes ter leave camp in, Viper Vera. Take yer skeleton pard along! Thar he is!"

Dropshot Bluff bestowed a frenzied kick on the table, and sent it and the ghostly object to the floor in a jumbled heap. Then, with a defiant laugh, he turned and sprang into the starlight.

CHAPTER III.

A TERRIBLE SCHEME.

TEN minutes after the occurrences just narrated the alcalde went back to the sorceress's shanty. He found the door wide open and the woman gone.

"She knowed thar war no foolin' with Red Eye," exclaimed the alcalde when he had taken a survey of the interior of the little cabin. "Now, all I ask her is ter keep her distance. That skeleton trick war a good one, but it didn't skeer anybody! Max Mogalle's bones, eh? Let me see. Ef they war, then ther person thet fetched 'em hyer knows whar ther lost Ophir is. By heavens! why didn't I get a grip on this afore?"

He went out, and stood for a moment in the starlight.

Vera and the skeleton had disappeared so quickly that Red Eye Bar was ignorant of their departure, and Dropshot Bluff was glad to think that they were rid at last of the woman who had inhabited the camp for years.

He finally went back to his own shanty, and had scarcely crossed the threshold ere a pistol-shot rung clearly out on the night air. It took him outside again.

"War thet ther Viper's partin' salute?" he asked, with a light chuckle. "If it war, it may mean war ter ther knife. Confound her! I should hev taken this step afore, but better late than never—ha! ha! ha!"

The shot had no repetition, though the big alcalde of Red Eye Bar waited some time for one. He listened to the four quarters without results, and was about to invade the little cabin once more when something fluttering from the sign-board attracted his attention.

"She did thet," he said, moving toward it.

The next moment he passed under the board with its business legend of "git out o' here," and saw a white object dangling from it.

A closer inspection showed it to be a piece of white cloth, which was fastened to a skeleton hand.

"A part o' Max Mogalle thet concluded ter stay at Red Eye!" ejaculated Dropshot Bluff, jerking hand and cloth down. "Jehu! but I'll play a hand with these skeleton fingers. I'm satisfied thet a sudden shock will throw ther lost galoot ov Gold Gorge back inter his old state. I'll try it, anyhow."

The alcalde of Red Eye started off with the skeleton hand partially concealed in the cloth, and did not stop until he reached one of the last cabins in the line.

Halting before the log structure he took a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote thereon, using the logs as a writing-desk. Then he fixed the paper between the fleshless fingers and started toward the door again.

On tiptoe he opened the door and entered the cabin. A lamp burned low on a little shelf in one corner, and revealed a young man stretched out on a blanket and fast asleep.

Dropshot Bluff eyed the sleeper for a few moments and then laid the skeleton hand on the blanket close to his cheek.

"Ef thet don't throw 'im off his balance, I'll agree ter stop ther gold game whar it is," said the alcalde contemplating his work with satisfaction as he moved off. "Arter all, I'll thank the person who brought Max Mogalle ter camp. Waken an' find ther hand ov yer old pard at yer cheek, boy. By Jupiter! I'd like ter see ther tableau!"

The young man slept on unmindful of the work of Red Eye's alcalde who stole across the threshold again and shut the door carefully behind him.

A few yards behind the cabin a man stepped from between two shanties and stopped him.

"Dropshot, what is ther matter in camp?" asked this man who was big and bareheaded.

"Why?"

"Come an' see."

Without saying more, the speaker took the alcalde's arm and led him to the western confines of the camp where he pointed to the ground.

"What's thar?" cried Dropshot Bluff. "I see nothin'."

"Get down an' look."

The alcalde of Red Eye dropped upon his knees and began to examine the trail.

"Don't yer see dark marks on ther white stones?" asked the stalwart fellow, who was looking down upon him.

"I do now. What is it?"

"Blood!"

Dropshot Bluff was on his feet in an instant.

"Whose is it? What do you know, Dagger Johnny?"

"Not much, only thet some bein' has been bleedin' along hyer like a stuck pig. I heard a pistol-shot awhile ago—"

"So did I, but I thought it war ther Viper's partin' salute."

"Has she gone?"

"Yes. I took ther dilemma ov Red Eye by ther horn, an' made Vera ther Viper bid farewell ter camp."

Dagger Johnny exhibited a great deal of astonishment and was silent for a moment.

"Mebbe thet war her work," he said.

"But whom did she shoot?" asked Dropshot

Bluff. "Ef ther blood ther flowed from a human bein', whar is he?"

"Foller ther trail."

"By Jericho! thet's just what we'll do! Call ther boys. This is suthin' for thar hull camp. Mebbe murder hes been committed. I'll get ther daisies out."

A moment later Dropshot Bluff let slip several rousing shouts which went echoing through the camp, and immediately a number of cabin doors flew open and a number of men sprung into the street.

"This way, pards," said the alcalde, directing them to him by the sound of his voice.

The pards of Red Eye had issued from the cabins already armed, and they stood in the presence of their acknowledged leader with cocked revolvers and ready to engage in any kind of fray.

"When ther wind war blowin' from ther shanties awhile ago, thar war a pistol fired hyerabouts," said the alcalde. "Somebody must hev got hit, for thar's blood on ther stones at yer feet, an' ther trails goes in thet direction. Ar' we all hyer?"

The men mentally counted their numbers for a moment and then replied.

"All but ther mistery, Vera, an' Grim George."

"Mebbe," said Dagger Johnny, touching Dropshot's arm as if by accident, "mebbe thet blood ar' Grim's."

"It can't be. Who'd shoot him?"

"I don't know, but he's ther only missin' man."

"Grim George was one of the characters of Red Eye. He had come to California with the present alcalde, and there was no doubt that the two men had been pards a long time before they first saw the Golden State.

Dropshot seldom mentioned Utah and the Mormons; Grim George had a thousand tales about them. Now and then he had strengthened the belief that the alcalde once dwelt among them, that he had once been an elder in the Mormon church; but he never went into details.

He and Dropshot Bluff were close companions, and Grim George was as eager to find the lost bonanza as his friend, the big alcalde.

A tigerish light flew into Dropshot Bluff's eyes when Dagger Johnny suggested that the blood on the stones might be that of Grim George.

The alcalde clinched his hands and hissed:

"For each ounce ov Grim's blood, ef this is his, I'll hev a pound of his murderer's!"

In a short time the entire population of Red Eye was on the crimson trail which led down the camp's solitary street in front of the cabins. The wind had suddenly lulled, and there was not enough to stir the long locks of the wild pards of the sierra.

Dropshot Bluff, with lips glued together, headed the blood-hunt, carrying a light in one hand and a revolver in the other. He had his followers at his heels.

The trail led to the last cabin and beyond.

The alcalde glanced at the shanty in which he had left the skeleton hand as he passed it. He wondered if the young man was still asleep beside his ghostly bedfellow, and a strange smile appeared at the corners of his mouth when he thought what the awakening might be.

"By Jerusalem! it goes to ther mountains—ther blood trail does," exclaimed Dagger Johnny.

"Shall we foller it, cap'n?"

"Ter tartarus, ef it goes thet far!" was the swift reply.

The hunt was resumed, but it soon and suddenly ended.

All at once the alcalde of Red Eye stopped and retreated a step.

"We're at ther end ov ther trail," he exclaimed, "Hyar lies a man as dead as a door nail!"

The pards of Red Eye Bar pressed forward and looked at the human being lying across the trail on his face.

"Turn ther galoot over!"

It was done. Dropshot Bluff performed the job, and the next instant he sprung back with a wild ejaculation.

"It is Grim!"

Yes, dead and already rigid lay the alcalde's pard, the man who knew so much about Mormondom.

The men drew back and looked not at Grim George, but at their leader.

The alcalde of Red Eye had straightened over the corpse, and was looking down upon it with a singular stare.

"Go back!" he said suddenly to the gang, warning them away. "I'll join yer presently."

Dagger Johnny motioned the pards of Red Eye from the spot, and putting himself at their head, led them back.

All at once the bronzed alcalde dropped beside his pard and held his lamp close to his face.

"Ther only witness but one ter what I did in Mormondom!" he said. "Ef my enemies killed you, Grim, they war fools. They kin never convict me now. I'll see how the brand of brotherhood looks on ther breast ov a dead man. You never flinched while I burned it thar, Grim, an' I'll hev the blood ov ther person who dropped yer in yer tracks!"

Dropshot Bluff then proceeded to open the dead man's shirt, and the lamp showed him the fresh marks of a knife which had nearly obliterated the rude brand of a bowie and revolver crossed.

"A foe did it—one who knew we war pards!" said the alcalde.

"Hyar, over yer, Grim, with my naked hand on ther brand I gave yer, I swear ter hev ther life ov yer slayer! Next ter my hunt for ther lost Ophir, shall be my hunt for blood!"

He got up and looked back toward the cabins.

"Don't I know pretty well who did it?" he went on. "Ef I hedn't driven Vera, ther Viper, from Red Eye ter-night, Grim George would not be hyer dead an' slashed! She follered up ther shot I heard. She had ter leave her mark behind, but she couldn't hev left one more fatal ter her own interests. Witch ov ther sierra, you hev Dropshot Bluff ag'in' yer from ter-night! Why couldn't yer go away without takin' ther life ov ther man who stood by me in Utah?"

He snuffed the lamp and turned back to the cabins, leaving the dead desperado lying across the trail with his face upturned to the stars.

He walked rapidly and with long strides.

"We begin ther death-hunt by daybreak," he muttered. "Before to-morrow night we may burn Red Eye, behind us, as we once burned Gold Gorge."

The alcalde was about to enter his cabin when a quick step startled him, and he turned to look into the face of Dagger Johnny.

"Almighty Caesar! I want ter show yer suthin', cap'n," he exclaimed, showing by his dilated eyes that something of a startling nature had occurred. "I made ther diskivery by ther merest accident."

"Another dead man?" asked the alcalde, almost prepared for anything.

"No. If it war, Dagger Johnny would wish himself ten times dead."

Dropshot Bluff was seized by the arm and led over the ground he had just traversed in coming from Grim George.

"Easy now! We might disturb him," whispered Johnny, halting before a cabin near the end of the line.

The door was approached by the two men on tip-toe, and the alcalde of Red Eye, was led up to the little window beside it.

"Look in thar," said his pard.

He looked into the cabin and saw by the light of a lamp, a young man seated on a blanket gazing at a skeleton hand which he held, a sight that sent a thrill through the stalwart frame of the camp alcalde.

"Good, good Mogalle! You've come back to me, ha! ha! ha!" suddenly laughed the cabin's occupant. "I've been waiting for you a long time! Now we'll go to the lost mine and become Gold Kings. Ho, ho, ho!"

Dropshot could hardly suppress a cry of delight. His scheme had proved successful. The youth was mad!

CHAPTER IV.

ALMOST A SUCCESS.

"WHAT d'yer think ov that?" asked Dagger Johnny, looking at Dropshot Bluff, as they stole from the cabin.

"It looks like he's gone back inter ther old state," was the reply.

"But, whar did he run across thet skeleton hand?"

"Heaven knows! He can't hev been keepin' it all this time."

The alcalde of Red Eye was good at deception. Dagger Johnny shook his head.

"I've watched 'im pretty closely along with ther rest ov ther boys, but I never saw him hev a hand like that. Mebbe he'll give us ther key ter ther big bonanza in one ov his mad spells."

"I'm afraid not," said Dropshot Bluff. "He didn't do it when he war in that fix afore, an' I'm afraid it'll be ther same way now."

All this time there was a gleam of fiendish satisfaction in the last speaker's eyes. It was evident that his words belied his thoughts.

He turned suddenly upon his companion, and gave orders for the corpse of Grim George to be moved into camp for burial, then he turned to his own shanty again.

Dagger Johnny went away to carry out the alcalde's command, and led a number of the camp pards toward the spot where Grim George lay under the stars.

"It succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations," said Dropshot Bluff, as he issued from his cabin a few minutes later. "By ther skeleton hand I am goin' ter find ther trail ter ther hidden gold mine. We ar' goin' ter git thar by one ov Vera's tricks. Arter thet we'll pay her for shootin' Grim."

He sneaked back down the street to the cabin that contained the youth and the skeleton hand, and soon found himself at the window. If he had any doubts of the young man's condition, they were dissipated now.

Gilbert Golden had not moved since the alcalde saw him last. He still occupied the blanket, and was handling the ghostly object he had found on his pillow, and talking childishly to it.

Dropshot eagerly drank in every word; he did not let a syllable escape his ears.

"I wonder if he knows me," muttered the desperado, stepping to the door.

A minute later he lifted the wooden latch without noise, and tiptoed his way into the cabin. The youth did not notice him; he was still jabbering to the skeleton hand.

For a few moments the alcalde stood above the madman, and looked down upon him. It was one of the strangest sights he had ever seen, and he had seen many strange ones during his eventful career.

At last Dropshot Bluff stooped and touched Gilbert Golden. The youth started and raised his eyes to his visitor.

"Wal, Gilbert, what hev ye thar?" asked the alcalde, glancing at the bony hand.

"It is Max, ha, ha!" was the reply. "Max has come back! He has been gone a long time!"

"Whar did yer leave him?"

"Where the gold was, ho, ho! Max said he was going to die there; but he did not, for seel he has come back to me. Mebbe he will go to see his child, ha, ha, ha!"

"His daughter?" ejaculated Dropshot Bluff.

"The pretty little girl he left behind. Max and Gilbert will go together!"

The insane youth got up and with the hand pressed to his bosom started toward the door. Dropshot Bluff stepped quietly in between and laid his hand gently on Gilbert's arm.

"Don't be in a hurry. Thar's plenty ov time ter find Max's child," he said. "We'll help yer find her, Gilbert, my boy. Go back ter yer blanket, er ter yer chair—thar!" and he seated the youth on a three-legged stool at the little table the room contained and then seated himself on a similar piece of furniture opposite him.

"Now let us get at this thing, Gilbert," continued the alcalde of Red Eye, stretching one hand across the table and touching the youth's wrist. "Don't yer recollect how yer got ter thet bonanza? Try ter think for a moment."

The stare which had filled the young man's eyes seemed to soften under Dropshot Bluff's words, and the big alcalde took sudden hope.

"We all found it, but I was the only one who got back to Gold Gorge," Gilbert said, and then he laughed so insanely that the sport shuddered and took his hand away.

"Try ter fix ther place," he said. "Can't yer draw a map ov ther kentry on ther table hyer—a map with ther streams ther trail crosses, ther gorges an' such? Hyer's a piece ov chalk. Now go ter work, Gilbert, an' give me ther outlines."

Gilbert Golden took the chalk extended across the table by the alcalde's bronzed hand, and looked curiously at it for awhile.

"Go ahead!" said the impatient Bluff.

"It was up mountain, down mountain, ho, ho!" cried Gilbert. "We waded streams and crossed them on wild bridges. This is the way we went to the El Dorado!"

The alcalde of Red Eye felt like springing out of his boots when he saw the boy draw a tortuous line across half of the table.

"Gods! he's gettin' at it at last!" he ejaculated. "That skeleton hand is worth its weight in gold."

Finally, he did spring up and stepped behind Gilbert Golden so as to have the gold-map right, then, holding his breath, he watched over the youth's shoulder.

Slowly, as if it was a laborious task, Gilbert moved the chalk over the table, making a number of marks which were fast growing into an intelligible diagram. Dropshot Bluff never took his eyes from the work.

At last the youth stopped; he seemed exhausted.

"Now, which is north?" asked the the alcalde. "Ther p'int's ov ther compass ar' all thet's lackin'. Add 'em ter yer map, Gilbert, an' ye'll complete it."

The mad youth looked up into Dropshot Bluff's face with th old meaningless stare.

"Go on. Give yer map ther compass p'int's," said the alcalde.

There was no movement on the youth's part. He did not comprehend the language simple though it was.

"Confound it!" growled the boss sport biting his lips. "He don't know what that means. Ther map's kerrect—I'll bet my head on thet, but without ther compass p'int's he might as well rub it out."

"Rub it out, ho, ho!" echoed Gilbert Golden turning to the table. "I will blot out the trails I've made!"

"No, no! I didn't mean that," cried Dropshot Bluff darting at Gilbert's arm. "You'll add ther compass p'int's by an' by! Don't rub yer work out!—for heaven's sake!"

The lost man of Gold Gorge jerked his arm from the alcalde's clutch and before he could prevent swept it like a tornado across the board!

Dropshot Bluff uttered a yell of tigerish rage. "What d'yer mean?" he cried darting at Gilbert's throat which he grasped as the youth rose from the stool.

"You've blotted out ther map ov ther biggest fortune out o' doors!"

The answer was a senseless laugh which only increased the alcalde's passion.

"Hang me! ef I don't dash yer brains out ag'in' ther wall!" he roared forcing Gilbert back from the table. "We've watched yer for this map year arter year. Ye wouldn't draw it when ye war sane, so I threw yer back inter ther old state hopin' ye'd git at it thar! I warn't wrong either. Confound yer! why did yer blot it out when it wanted nothin' but ther compass p'int? Now sit down thar an' draw it over, er by ther high heaven! I'll leave yer dead hyer when I go out!"

With the rudeness of a villain, Dropshot forced the youth back upon the stool and put the piece of chalk between his fingers.

"Now, go ter work!" he grated. "Remember that ye'r dealin' with ther alcalde ov Red Eye Bar!"

He did not remove his hand from Gilbert's shoulder, but clutched it like a vise, while he spoke.

Gilbert did not stir. He held the chalk in a listless manner, and looked vacantly at the few faint marks his sleeve had left of the map so suddenly destroyed.

Dropshot Bluff frothed like an enraged lion; his eyes seemed coals of fire.

"Won't yer?" he cried. "Ar' yer goin' ter sit thar an' give me nothin' for my threats? Mebbe ye think I won't do anything! I never play, Gilbert Golden. Ther alcalde ov Red Eye ar' always in earnest!"

These words had no effect. Gilbert Golden did not move.

All at once Dropshot Bluff jerked him from the stool and wheeled with him toward the wall behind the table.

"For blottin' ther map out I'll throw you into ther middle ov next week!" he exclaimed. "I could scatter yer infernal brains on these walls. Won't draw ther map ag'in? Then take thet!"

A moment later the stalwart boss ov Red Eye with all his strength on top, threw the demented youth from him with the fury of a tiger.

It was a cruel revenge, for Gilbert Golden struck the hard logs with terrible force and sunk at the foot without a single groan.

The force with which he struck was enough to deprive him of life.

"Thar! mebbe ye'll like thet for a change!" cried Dropshot Bluff, glaring at his work. "I'm no infant when I exert myself. 'If you rekiver an' ask for sympathy in Red Eye, by Jupiter! I'll finish my work with ther dropper!"

He bestowed another glance on the youth lying senseless, if not dead, on the floor, and passed out with tiger light still flaring up at intervals in his dark eyes.

He never looked behind him as he walked away, but more than once he cursed in audible tones his failure to get the compass points of the gold map.

"Hello! Dagger Johnny!" he exclaimed, halting suddenly before the man who seemed to be waiting for him in front of his cabin. "Whar did yer leave Grim George? I forgot ter tell yer ter fetch him—"

He paused and seemed to go back a step. "You ain't Dagger Johnny," he said to the man. "Excuse me. You've just come ter Red Eye?"

"I haven't been hyer twenty minutes," was the reply. "Are you ther alcalde?"

"I am Dropshot Bluff, boss, alcalde an' all," said the big sport. "Come inside. This is my shanty."

The alcalde opened the door of his cabin and led the way inside. He was followed by a stranger who was a real giant in physique with keen black eyes and a well-shaven face which was remarkably handsome.

Dropshot took a little lamp from the shelf fastened to the logs and placed it on the table so that its light would fall on his visitor's face and figure.

"What may I call yer?" asked the alcalde when he had taken him in from head to foot.

"Merle Montgomery."

"No camp handle, eh?"

"Oh, yes; Magic Merle," said the stranger with a smile.

"Wal, Magic, this is Red Eye Bar, no great shakes I reckon, but it contains ther dandiest lot ov tigers when you stir 'em up thet ever inhabited ther sierra. We run an independent camp hyer, an' improvement on Gold Gorge. I don't ask how yer come ter hit us ter-night, for it's none ov my business. We may want a new pard for ther one what hed his chips cashed at death's counter since sundown. Hang me ef I don't feel like welcomin' yer ter Red Eye."

"What! one ov yer men dead?"

"Grim George. An' don't yer forget, Magic Merle, thet ther person what killed him will get paid in full for her work. Come with me an' I'll show yer ther corpse an' introduce yer ter Red Eye Bar."

Dropshot took the man's arm and led him out.

He looked at the alcalde and his eyes seemed to twinkle for triumph.

"All right. Show me Red Eye," he said, and then he added under his breath:

"Oh, I've struck it rich at last, Queen Moro!"

If Dropshot Bluff had heard the last sentence he would have stopped short and glared at the man walking at his side, but as he did not, he went down the street till he found a group of men in front of one of the cabins.

"Ah! hyer we ar', Magic!" he exclaimed, and then facing the men he continued:

"Gents, this is Magic Merle, an' though I hev'n't known him ten minutes, I'm inclined ter consider him a daisy."

Magic Merle doffed his broad sombrero, and in rich tones told the astonished pards of Red Eye that he was pleased to form their acquaintance.

"Now, gents," he said, "if you'll guide me to your bug-juice pharmacy, we'll take lightnin' straight."

"We've got no such institution hyer," said Dropshot Bluff. "Red Eye is a temp'rance camp; bet yer life, Magic."

Magic Merle laughed with the crowd.

CHAPTER V.

MAGIC MERLE AT WORK.

IN a secluded place on the mountain-side, where a group of young pines lifted their heads skyward, Grim George was buried by the pards of Red Eye Bar.

No oath of vengeance was exacted over his grave, but Dropshot Bluff said quietly that the slayer of his pard should know that the law of the mountains was still "blood for blood."

The presence of Magic Merle, the stranger who had lately reached the camp, may have prevented the taking of an oath. He stood by and saw Grim George, wrapped in a blanket, lowered into his bloody grave, and he went back to Red Eye, shoulder to shoulder with Dropshot Bluff.

Morning came again, but nobody issued from Gilbert's cabin at the end of the street.

The alcalde of Red Eye cast many inquiring glances toward the cabin. Had he killed the demented youth?

"What ef I did?" he mentally exclaimed. "I flung him ag'in' ther logs hard enough ter hev crushed an' armadillo. If he is dead, thar's no gettin' to ther lost bonanza by him."

Magic Merle had unsaddled the horse which had carried him to Red Eye, and accepted as a home, the cabin lately occupied by Grim George.

"Well, I've found the men of Gold Gorge, Queen Moro," he said, when toward the close of the day, he found himself in the shanty which the alcalde had told him to make his home. "I've followed trail after trail, but I've finally succeeded. Now, my next move is to discover whether they ever found Gilbert, the lost man of Gold Gorge. If they know where he is, I will know it. I have sworn to fling the last Ophir at your feet, woman, and I intend to keep my oath to the letter."

At that very moment, Gilbert Golden was only a few yards from him, and in a miserable condition.

Dropshot Bluff's patience at last became exhausted. He could wait no longer to know the young man's fate, and so he sauntered down the street in the dusk of evening, and opened the cabin door.

A glance inside revealed a human figure stretched out on a blanket, and after a second look, the alcalde of Red Eye recognized his victim.

"Gettin' over it, eh?" chuckled Dropshot, devilishly. "Ye kin bless yer stars that it isn't worse than it is. Ef I had exerted a little more strength, I could hev driven yer into ther logs. How's yer mind by this time, I wonder?"

He walked inside and looked down into the eyes that had become riveted upon him. Gilbert did not move; he merely looked at the alcalde and shut his lips.

Dropshot Bluff glanced at the table and saw that not a single trace of the gold map now remained. The young man had obliterated it entirely upon his return to consciousness.

"Bound ter cheat us out ov it, I see!" grated the alcalde, throwing a swift look from the table to suffering Gilbert. "I could grind yer ter powder under my boot-heels. I wonder if Magic Merle could get anything out ov yer? I've a notion to try 'im."

The youth did not speak while the alcalde remained in the cabin, but not for a moment did he remove his eyes from him.

Dropshot Bluff went away without attempting to address Gilbert who still looked demented and almost helpless, and a few moments later entered Grim George's shanty.

He found Magic Merle there as if he were quietly waiting for him.

"Did yer ever hev anything ter do with crazy people, Magic?" began Dropshot Bluff abruptly enough to cause a start.

"I've seen many in my time," was the quick reply, for in a flash of time, as it were, Magic Merle seemed to have grasped the alcalde's meaning.

"We've got one ov thet kind in camp, a young man what lost his head some years ago arter he war off on a wild trip among the mountains."

"A young man, you say?"

"About twenty-four. Years ago it got rumored thet thar war a gold mine somewhar

that war ther biggest thing under ground. Five men started ter find it. They hed nothin' definite ter bank on. For five years they tramped it, fightin' b'ars, Injuns an' starvation. At last ther sole survivor crawled back inter camp at Gold Gorge where we then war. He war hardly more than a boy an' it war astonishin' thet he should be ther lost one ov thet party. He came back without a button, thet is, Magic, his mind war all in a whirl, an' he knew nothin'. Still, he used to talk like a fool about a gold mine somewhar which they had marked in a peculiar manner. He even went so far as ter write his ravings on slips ov paper an' ter draw off a diagram which would puzzle the Almighty."

"W'ar ar' they now?" asked Magic Merle.

"They disappeared one night from ther place whar I kept 'em. A young half-breed who had been layin' round camp for a week went off at ther same time. Never mind. Them papers had nothin' in 'em for anybody, but I war savin' 'em up in hopes, yer see. Wal, arter thet ther boy Gilbert wandered off, an' thet made us abandon Gold Gorge. We started out ter find him, an' Jehu! what a tramp we had."

"You found him?"

"At last! but ther game wasn't worth ther powder, Magic," said the alcalde, with a smile. "We found him wanderin' through ther mountains clothed ag'in in his right mind, but he couldn't remember anything about ther tramps ov ther five companions. Of course we took 'im in. Now he's off ag'in; went back inter insanity last night. It's a queer case, Magic Merle, but I'm satisfied that the lost Ophir story is a grand humbug. Ther five men found nothin', an' ther hunt for it with starvation first upset Gilbert's brain."

Magic Merle, who sat across the little deal table while Dropshot Bluff spun this strange narrative, did not exhibit any emotion. No one could have told from his demeanor that he had made an important discovery.

"Mebbe you'd like ter see Gilbert," continued the alcalde of Red Eye. "He gets violent when he is mad, an' sometimes plunges ag'in' ther walls ov his shanty an' injures himself. He had one ov them kind o' spells on last night. Come, we'll go down an' see 'im."

Magic Merle got up and followed the big alcalde from the cabin. Side by side the two men walked down the street.

"Mebbe he's asleep," whispered Dropshot Bluff, when near the youth's cabin, and the next moment he opened the door.

Sure enough, on the blanket under the lamp on the shelf lay Gilbert Golden asleep and breathing heavily. Magic Merle looked down upon him a moment, and then glanced at the stolid alcalde.

Then, without a word, Magic Merle drew the stool close to the blanket and seated himself upon it.

"Watch 'im till I come back," said Dropshot Bluff in a whisper, as he touched the Californian's shoulder. "I won't keep yer on guard long," and out he went, leaving Magic Merle alone with the lost man of Gold Gorge.

The eyes of the watcher followed the alcalde to the door and beyond. Then he rose silently and took down the lamp. Stooping over the youth, he held the light close to his face, and for several minutes gazed steadfastly into it.

"Found at last!" he muttered. "Found! and insane! Well, that makes no difference, Gilbert Golden; my real work begins here. Queen Moro's story corresponds with Dropshot Bluff's so far as it goes. The masked woman, who sent me oath-bound from Sacramento, believes that the great bonanza actually exists. The alcalde of this camp affects to hoot the story. We shall see which one is right, and you shall solve the mystery, my boy."

He put the lamp back and returned to the stool.

A light akin to a gleam of triumph had come to the man's eyes, and it seemed to increase while he watched Gilbert Golden on his blanket.

"What was that the young girl said who sprung into the room when I was taking my oath in Sacramento?" he went on with a smile of mingled scorn and derision. "I was going to my death when I undertook to find Gilbert and the lost mine! Wasn't that it? Well, I am not there yet, and I have found the lost man of Gold Gorge, the first mile-post and a very important one too on the road to success. But I'd like to know who you really are, Queen Moro, and why you send me after the lost El Dorado."

At that moment Gilbert moved and muttered something.

Magic Merle stooped suddenly and tried to catch his words, but the effort proved unavailing. The next moment Gilbert opened his eyes. He did not see the man on the stool immediately and when he noticed him there was no start only a faint shudder of aversion.

"Who are you?" asked Gilbert in sane tones.

Magic Merle's hand swooped downward and clutched the youth's wrist. He saw that Gilbert Golden was himself again.

"I am Magic Merle; let that suffice for the present," he said. "You have been asleep."

"Yes, and I feel as if I had fallen from a cliff. My whole body is in pain. You don't belong in Red Eye?"

"No."
"Are you hunting the lost Ophir like Dropshot Bluff and pards?"

"We'd all like to find a stake like that; but don't let that myth bother you, Gilbert. I am glad that I have met you."

Gilbert Golden put up his hand which Magic Merle seized and pressed cordially.

"I like you already," said the youth. "I fancy that we could be friends and even pards."
"I think so."

"Say the word and we will be!" cried Gilbert.

"Friends and pards then!" answered Magic Merle smiling.

The young gold-hunter got up and put his hand on the Californian's shoulder.

"Are we alone?" he asked in a manner that seemed to impress Magic Merle that an important revelation was coming.

"We are alone."

"Then let me say that it has all come back to me at last after so many months of waiting and darkness."

"What has?"

"The trails to the mine," was the reply. "It is as clear to me now as though I had them traced on a map before me. Isn't it singular, Magic Merle?"

"Wonderful!"

"Recollection came back in a flash as it were," the youth went on. "I will show you. Ah! what is this?—a piece of chalk on the floor! I wonder how it came there? See! I will draw the diagram on my table! I tell you it is as clear as morning light."

Magic Merle seemed laboring under a terrible excitement which he was trying to suppress.

"No; not on that table for the world!" he cried, clutching Gilbert's wrist and drawing him back. "Keep it where it is for the present—written on your heart!"

"Why? Don't you want to see it?"

"Yes; but I can wait. The mine won't run off."

"No, but my head might," laughed Gilbert.

"I'll risk that," was the reply. "Will you obey me?"

"I will; we are friends and pards, you know."

"Then, not a word about the mine to a single citizen of Red Eye Bar. To them all remember that you know nothing. It would be to our hand if you played insane for awhile."

"My God! I can't do that," exclaimed Gilbert. "I have passed through that awful stage in reality. I can't mimic it. Is it to my advantage to keep silent about the mine to the pards of Red Eye Bar?"

"Yes."

"I believe you, Magic Merle. I wish I knew what makes me feel so sore. I must have been pitched against something."

"Maybe you were," said Magic Merle. "In finding you, Gilbert, I have accomplished a part of my sworn mission. Let us go to the end together. Do you recollect a young girl—"

"Floss!" cried Gilbert. "She is Max Mogalle's child. Where is she, Magic Merle? Oh, but she has forgotten the boy Gilbert."

"Not by a thousand leagues," was the answer. "But hush! Dropshot Bluff is here. Remember! we are not friends and pards. You know nothing about the big bonanza."

Gilbert dropped back upon his blanket and quickly assumed the usual position of a person sound asleep.

The next moment the cabin door opened and a rough voice announced the alcalde's return.

"Hyer's suthin' that needs explainin'," cried Dropshot Bluff extending a paper. "Hyer's a charge ag'in' yer, Magic."

Magic Merle took down the lamp and to his astonishment read:

"DROPSHOT BLUFF:—The man who has invaded Red Eye is Keen Kennard the Sleuth-hound of Shasta."

CHAPTER VI.

FACING THE MUSIC.

"WHAT have yer ter say ter that?" asked the alcalde of Red Eye when he saw by Magic Merle's expression that he had reached the end of the brief letter.

"In the first place, Keen Kennard ov Shasta would probably be a fool ter come hyer with a game ov his own ag'in' Red Eye, an', secondly, ther writer ov this note doesn't know what he's writin' about."

These words were spoken with a coolness that evidently staggered Dropshot Bluff.

"Who delivered this paper?" continued Magic Merle.

"I don't know exactly how it got inter camp. Dagger Johnny gave it ter me awhile ago, sayin' that thar war suthin' that'd probably interest me."

"An' it has?" observed Magic Merle, with a smile.

"Ter some extent."

There was a lull in the conversation at this point, and Dropshot Bluff looked down at Gilbert.

"How's ther boy?" he asked.

"Sound asleep yet," said the visitor. "It's

hard ter tell whether he'll waken sensible or not."

"You can't do anything for him, Magic Merle?"

"I don't know."

"I'd be willin' ter divide with yer ef yer could put us on ther track ov ther big bonanza, providin' thar is one, through him."

"I'll do thet ef I kin, ov course," said Magic Merle, and then he looked at the paper again and continued: "So I'm Keen Kennard, ther Shasta Sleuth, eh? What would I be huntin' hyer ef I war?"

"Hang me ef I know," laughed the alcalde.

"Ef you war Kennard, Magic, we'd be likely ter make Red Eye Bar too hot ter hold yer. This is our play-ground, an' by Heaven! we'll hev no detectives prowlin' about it."

"You'd make it warm for them, eh?"

"Hotter than tartarus!" exclaimed Dropshot Bluff. "This Keen Kennard isn't unknown ter me, though I've never seen 'im. I don't think we hev a man in camp thet ever sot eyes on 'im without it be Dagger Johnny, who used ter prospect, dance an' fight among ther camps 'round about Shasta. Don't think thet I b'lieve you ter be Keen Kennard. Thet note says thet ther man what's invaded Red Eye is ther Shasta Sleuth. We may hev another visitor. Watch ther boy till I investigate."

The big alcalde was off before Magic Merle could reply, and when the door had shut behind him Gilbert Golden opened his eyes.

A moment later he got upon his feet and laid his hand on Magic Merle's shoulder, while he looked searchingly into his face.

"You may deceive Dropshot Bluff an' pards, but, pardon me, you cannot hoodwink Gilbert. You are indeed Keen Kennard."

The boy spoke so earnestly and full of confidence that a smile appeared at the corners of the stranger's mouth.

"If I am," he said, "do you intend to give me away?"

"A thousand times no!" was the answer. "I remember that we are friends and pards. You have told me about Floss, Max Mogalle's child. That strengthens the bond. Give you away? They'd have to torture me to death first!"

Gilbert Golden's hand dropped until it found itself in Magic Merle's palm.

"You have guessed it," said he. "I am Keen Kennard. An oath has sent me to this camp. Your name was the last one I heard spoken ere I left Sacramento. I have found you—the lost man of Gold Gorge! My mission is next to find the lost bonanza."

"That will be no trick now, I think," said Gilbert. "My mind clear again still retains what I told you awhile ago. I can draw on yon table or anywhere else an exact route to the mine. We will go there together. You were sent out after it, you say?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"By a masked woman."

Gilbert started.

"A young girl come into the room and protested."

"That must have been Floss!" cried the young man.

"I don't know. I did not stay. As Kennard of Shasta, I swore to find both you and the lost Ophir. I am here for that purpose. I can't imagine who sent in that letter which told Dropshot Bluff who I am. Have I somebody on my track who has sworn to baffle me? If I have, then I must fight. I must meet this Dagger Johnny who used to prowl about Shasta as the alcalde says. The sooner I know what I have to meet in Red Eye the better. Keep cool. We've a big game to play."

Magic Merle or Keen Kennard, as we can now call him, went to the door and looked good-by at the young man who regarded him with something akin to speechless astonishment.

"Vera the Sorceress might know him, she knows everybody," he said to himself. "I ought to tell him about her and put him on his guard."

Before he could make up his mind to do this, Keen Kennard had crossed the threshold and was gone, and Gilbert was the sole occupant of the little cabin.

Meanwhile, Dropshot Bluff had found the pard called Dagger Johnny.

"Did yer read thet letter you gave me?" asked the alcalde.

"No. I saw thet it war directed ter you, an' it warn't my business ter read it."

"Whar did you get it?"

"I found it at ther edge of ther camp, fastened ter a stone. War it important?"

"Somewhat, ef it tells ther truth," said Dropshot. "When you war about Shasta, Johnny, did yer ever see a man called Kennard?"

"Keen Kennard, eh?" cried the desperado.

"Wal, I should gently remark, cap'n."

"D'yer think ye'd know 'im?"

"I would!"

"Wal, you've seen ther camp's visitor, ther man who calls himself Magic Merle?"

"Yes."

"Is that man Keen Kennard?"

"Jehu! yer don't think he is, d'yer?" exclaimed Dagger Johnny, starting back.

"I asked you for an opinion," was the answer, and the alcalde's eyes covered his pard in a stern manner. "We can't afford ter make any mistakes, nor kin we afford ter miss our man. What is yer opinion? Is Magic Merle Keen Kennard?"

"I didn't look at him in thet light. I never thought ov ther Shasta Sleuth-bound then."

"Thet'll do," said the alcalde, biting his lip.

"If you didn't know then you don't know now."

"I'll take another squint at him," said Dagger Johnny.

"Very well. Go down an' look in at Gilbert's window."

The two men departed, and Dagger Johnny moved off on his self-imposed mission.

"He can't be Keen Kennard," he said to himself. "But if he is, I kin guess what fetched him hyer. He's always on the trail ov suthin' big, an' he's trackin' down ther lost bonanza. He has followed us from Gold Gorge ter Red Eye, an' he's just ther kind o' man ter get ter ther mine ahead ov us."

Dagger Johnny was nearing Gilbert's cabin, when the door opened, and he saw the man from Shasta step out.

For a moment Keen Kennard stood exposed to view in the lamp-light, and Dagger Johnny's eyes became riveted upon him.

"I see 'im now as I didn't see 'im when he first came," the Red Eye pard said to himself. "Ef thet letter said thet he is Keen Kennard ov Shasta, by Jehosaphat! it didn't lie! That man is the famous detective ov ther north, an' ther sooner Red Eye throttles him ther better! Now whar's ther big alcalde?"

Dagger Johnny said no more, but glided back in search of Dropshot Bluff.

"It's ther biggest find ov my life," he muttered. "With that man on ther hunt ov ther lost Ophir we'll never see it. Ter insure success we hev ter throw 'im out o' our way. Thar's no other way out o' ther dilemma!"

The speaker walked straight to the alcalde's little cabin and entered without knocking.

"I war right!" exclaimed Dagger Johnny, springing at the man who sat at a table, his face in the light of a lamp. "Ther galoot at Gilbert's is Keen Kennard, ther Shasta Sleuth-bound!"

Dropshot Bluff looked into the man's face and said, quietly:

"We want ter be sartain ov this, Johnny."

"I'll swear ter it!" was the quick reply. "I got a good look at him in ther light ov Gilbert's lamp. He is ther man."

"Then, by heavens! we'll nip in the bud his little game, whatever it is. Keen Kennard, eh? You'll swear ter it, Johnny?"

"Bet yer boots, cap'n."

The alcalde of Red Eye came around the table with resolution flashing up in his eye. "Thar's no use in postponin' this thing," he said. "We'll take ther Shasta bull by ther horns right away. Come!"

Dagger Johnny stood still and looked at his friend the big alcalde.

"What ar' yer goin' ter do?" he asked.

"Goin' ter confront ther man from Shasta with ther eternal truth," was the response.

"You know 'im, thet's enough! All you'll hev ter do, Johnny, is ter stand up before him, an' swear that he is Keen Kennard ov Shasta."

Dagger Johnny seemed to recoil an inch.

"What! you don't go back on it?" cried Dropshot Bluff, grasping the sport's arm.

"No, no! He's Keen Kennard, I know it!"

"Then come along an' tell 'im so! You'll hev the hull camp at yer back, an' what's one man ag'in' all Red Eye?"

Before the hesitating sport could reply, a light rap sounded on the door, and the alcalde dropping his pard's arm, said:

"Come in."

The next moment the cabin door swung open, and the person who came in was the man from Shasta.

Dropshot Bluff threw a rapid glance at Dagger Johnny, who was staring at the unexpected visitor with but little color left in his hardened face.

"I'm a bearer ov news, cap'n," said Keen Kennard, smiling. "A wagon which is a curiosity has just come ter Red Eye. Thar isn't a sign ov life about ther trap, an' ther hosses seem asleep. D'yer often hev such things in this region?"

"We never do!" exclaimed the alcalde. "A wagon come ter Red Eye? Whar is it, Keen—Magic Merle?"

"It has halted just inside ov camp."

"By Jupiter! we'll see what it means. Somebody lost, mebbe. We hev'n't seen a wheel since we founded Red Eye."

Dropshot Bluff started toward the door, followed by Dagger Johnny, who pressed his hand significantly as he passed into the starlight.

The alcalde looked down and caught his pard's glance, but said nothing.

"Which way, Magic?" he asked the mountain detective.

"This," was the answer, and Keen Kennard started off at a rapid gait.

A short walk down the street and toward the west brought the trio rather suddenly upon two horses, and a poer wagon covered with a canvas standing in the starlight.

"A vehicle, by Jonah!" ejaculated Dropshot Bluff. "Wal, thet beats my time all holler. We'll hev ter move along, I guess. Civilization has found Red Eye out. We've got ter move along!"

There was not a sign of life about the mysterious wagon; the very horses seemed dead, though on their feet in the harness.

The three men approached cautiously and listened by the wheels. Not a sound came from the inside.

"Mebbe ther blamed thing's discharged its freight," suggested Dagger Johnny. "Strike a match an' look inside."

No sooner said than done. A match flared up in the alcalde's hand, and Dagger Johnny held up the curtain.

It took a moment for the match to illumine the interior of the mysterious wagon, and when it did, Dagger Johnny uttered a cry of astonishment.

"A sleepin' angel, by hokey! Cleopatra on wheels!" he cried.

Too astonished to speak, Dropshot Bluff and Keen Kennard were staring at the tenant of the wagon.

This person was a beautiful young girl, who lay asleep on some blankets with her arm for a pillow, and entirely unconscious of what was happening around her.

"I'd like ter know who guided all this beauty ter Red Eye," finally said the big alcalde. "We'll take keer ov her, though. Mebbe she's connected in some way with ther lost Ophir. I'll just open her eyes a bit."

Dropshot Bluff put forth his hand and was about to touch the sleeping beauty when he found Keen Kennard's hand at his wrist.

"Let'er hev her sleep out," said the detective, and then he added under his breath: "I don't want this girl to recognize me now. Heaven knows how she ever found Red Eye!"

"Very well," said the alcalde. "We'll let her sleep it out; but meanwhile we'll hunt up ther man what drove ther team."

CHAPTER VII.

VERY CLOSE QUARTERS.

KEEN KENNARD could not keep his eyes from the strange wagon while he moved away leaving it occupying the spot where it had been found.

He knew the young girl on sight, though he had seen her but once before.

He still remembered the night when before Queen Moro the masked woman of Sacramento he had taken a wild oath to find, at any risk, the lost gold mine; he recalled the strange scene in the house, the sudden appearance of the beautiful girl who in heartrending tones had pleaded with him to abandon the project. He saw the masked beauty clutch the fair being and hold her at bay while he completed his oath; he had never blotted these scenes entirely from his recollection.

And now the girl, whoever she was, and he thought he knew, had come to Red Eye Bar in a mysterious manner. She it was who was the occupant of the wagon drawn by the sleepy horses.

Yes, where was the man who had driven the team? Had the sleeping beauty come to Red Eye of her own accord, or had she been taken by force from Sacramento and carried by brute power among the mountains of the sierra?

"Not for the world must she recognize me as Kennard now," muttered the Shasta Shadow while he walked away. "I must not be found out yet, although I have been truly named by a mysterious letter which falls into Dropshot Bluff's hands; but by the eternal! the hand that touches her touches me!"

The beautiful occupant of the wagon slept soundly and threatened to do so till broad daylight. The news of her arrival was circulated quietly throughout the camp, and more than one bronze-faced and booted ruffian stole up to gratify his curiosity.

A look in the light of a match was always sufficient, and the Red Eye pard would steal back on tiptoe vowing that such a vision of loveliness had never struck the Bar before.

A thorough search of the camp revealed no driver. If a man had driven the girl to camp, he had abandoned her there. It was a very mysterious case.

"Mebbe she came hyer all alone," suggested Dagger Johnny catching Dropshot in a deep study.

"Thet girl?" almost roared the big alcalde.

"Thet's what I modestly remarked," was the reply.

"What's yer opinion worth anyhow?" cried Bluff. "You swore awhile ago that Magic Merle war Keen Kennard an' yet when he came inter my shanty, you beat a corpse for pallor. It strikes me, Johnny, thet you're not sartain who he is."

Dagger Johnny colored to the temples and showed his teeth.

"I'll prove it yet—I will!" he cried. "I still stick to my assertion. That man is Keen Kennard. He'll never deny it if I throw the charge inter his teeth."

"Never mind. We'll find out suthin' about

ther mountain Cleopatra first. I'm goin' ter find it out now."

Johnny was at Bluff's side when he started toward the wagon again and in a short time the two halted beside it once more.

The alcalde lifted a curtain and looked inside. Aided by a match, he saw the faultless figure among the blankets, but what a wonderful change had come over the girl's face.

Instead of being asleep her large black eyes were wide open, and Dropshot Bluff found them gazing into his face.

"Where am I?" suddenly cried the girl, springing up. "Is this a camp, and what do you call it?"

"This is Red Eye," said the alcalde with a smile. "You've fallen among friends. Ther rascally bound who drove yer hyer an' then deserted yer—"

"Nobody did that!" interrupted the girl laughing. "I came here alone."

"You did?" ejaculated Dropshot drawing back.

"I have driven this team over the mountains until I could resist sleep no longer. I believe I drove and slept for many hours at a time. So this is Red Eye Camp, and you must be its alcalde."

"That's just what I am," said Dropshot Bluff.

"What may I call you?"

"Floss Mogalle," was the reply.

"You'll get out, Floss, an' let us give yer ther best quarters we've got in Red Eye. By jingo! we don't often hev angel visits like this one. I'll help yer out, girl."

"It is not necessary. I may not want to stop here. Red Eye Bar may not be my journey's end."

"We'll make it so as far as treatment is concerned. Thar's no women in camp just now, though thet's not sayin' thet Red Eye hez never known ther fair sex. Hyer, Johnny, help hold ther canvas up until ther young lady kin alight."

"Not until you have answered one question," said Floss, touching the alcalde's arm with her small white hand. "Do you know anything about the lost man of Gold Gorge?"

"Jehu!" ejaculated Dagger Johnny. "Whar an' how did she get on ter thet?"

The girl looked at the Red Eye pard who was quickly rebuked by a look from Dropshot.

"I see that you have heard of him, she said."

"Is he here?"

A strange thought had flashed across the alcalde's mind.

"She can influence him if anybody can," he said to himself. "We kin get her inter ther toils an' I will mold'er ter my likin'. I've heard Gilbert talk about Floss a thousand times. This is the girl. She can draw from him the diagram of the gold mine. She shall become ther Delilah of Red Eye Bar. It's worth a trial anyhow!"

Then the alcalde of Red Eye answered the anxious girl.

"Mebbe ye'r pretty close ter ther lost man ov Gold Gorge," he said.

Floss uttered a cry of delight.

"Take me to him at once!" she exclaimed.

"Thank heaven! I have found him at last! What a wild, strange and lonely journey I have had. I escaped from a singular woman and undertook this hunt alone. I have found Gilbert! I have beaten the man from Shasta!"

Dropshot and Johnny exchanged quick glances at the last sentence.

"I'm glad ye got hyer safe," said the alcalde.

"Take my hand, now, an' you shall see him afore long."

"Gilbert! Gilbert!" exclaimed the girl joyfully.

"Make'er face ther man from Shasta first, cap'n," whispered a voice at the alcalde's elbow. "She'll either confirm my words er prove me a liar. I want ther trial made."

"I'll do it," assented Dropshot. "Go an' find Magic Merle."

Jonny started off and the big alcalde turned to assist the girl from the wagon.

By this time a dozen men, burly, like the alcalde, himself, had reached the wagon, and would have greeted Floss with a loud cheer if Dropshot Bluff, by a look, had not prevented.

"Wait hyer a little while," said the alcalde, gently holding the girl back. "I've sent for some one."

"For Gilbert? I thank you, sir?" and Floss looked her thanks as she spoke. "You do not know," she continued, "how I have longed for this moment. I vowed to find Gilbert if he were alive. I grew tired waiting for reports from the man sent out from Sacramento."

"Hyer he comes!"

The next moment two men came in sight, and one was recognized by the crowd as the man called Magic Merle.

Dropshot Bluff took a bunch of lucifers from his pocket and struck them on the wheel.

Magic Merle started slightly when he caught sight of the girl standing on the ground beside the big alcalde, but continued to advance, eyed like a hawk by Dagger Johnny, who kept at his side.

"Hyer's a gent I want yer ter see first, Floss," said Dropshot Bluff as Magic Merle came up.

"He's an old friend no doubt—left yer in Sacramento some time ago, eh? Hyer he is!"

The young girl leaned forward under the up-lifted matches with a great deal of curiosity in her eyes. The men seemed to hold their breath.

"She'll give him away; I'll bet my throat on it!" ejaculated Dagger Johnny. "Then, good-by, Keen Kennard!"

Having halted before Floss, the man from Mount Shasta drew himself to his full stature and looked her in the eye. It was a look of life or death.

Floss Mogalle sprung toward the gold detective, but seemed to quail before his glance.

"I don't know that man!" she said looking up at Dropshot Bluff.

"Never saw him afore, eh?"

Floss did not hesitate.

"Never!" she said.

The crowd started as if the spell had been broken.

"Look me in ther eye an' say that!" exclaimed Dagger Johnny, and a moment later he clutched the girl's arm and drew her forward.

"By Jupiter! I know a thing or two, I guess. Tell me you don't know thet man, eh? Look inter Dagger Johnny's face an' say thet he isn't Keen Kennard, a detective from Shasta! No foolin', miss. Yer say thet a man left Sacramento on a great trail—you've said thet he came originally from Shasta. Tell me thet he doesn't stand thar! Will yer?"

Floss looked up into the merciless face of the alcalde's right bower since the death of Grim George, but did not flinch.

"If I repeat my words you will not believe me," she answered.

"Not ef you say thet man isn't Kennard, the Shadow from Shasta!" was the retort.

"Very well, I say it," was the answer.

Dagger Johnny dropped the girl's arm in amazement and threw a mad look at Dropshot and the crowd.

"It stumps me," he grated. "I say, gents ov Red Eye, thar stands a man who is known round Shasta as Keen Kennard, a gold-detective. He knows thet I've unmasked him—thet I know he is no more Magic Merle than Red Eye is New York! He kin stand thar an' curl his lip, but thet doesn't make out Dagger Johnny a liar! It is my word ag'in' his'n, pards ov Red Eye Bar! Dagger Johnny ag'in' Keen Kennard. Take yer choice!"

The speaker stepped back and awaited results. His eyes flashed triumph, and the hand that had covered the man from Shasta dropped slowly to his side.

Floss's eyes had fallen beneath Keen Kennard's gaze.

"Heaven help me!" she murmured. "Pardon the falsehood I have spoken to save his life. I did not expect to find him here. I thought him dead long ago. Where has he been hunting so long? I wish I had never met you, Keen Kennard."

All at once the mountain detective stepped forward and glared at Dagger Johnny.

"It is almighty strange that a man can't peaceably visit a camp without havin' himself denounced by a miserable ruffian!" he said, his black eyes fixed on Dagger Johnny. "In the eyes of that camp liar I am Keen Kennard of Shasta. I want him to make good that assertion by fightin' me whar we stand! What's yer choice, Dagger Johnny? Ye've got a belt full ov heart-hunters thar. Draw ther one yer want. Magic Merle ov Mercedes is at yer service!"

"No postponement, no flinchin'!" he went on.

"Gentlemen ov Red Eye Bar, a man has a right ter meet a charge as he pleases. Stand back and let that galoot face the man he has accused. Me Keen Kennard? Let the best eye an' the quickest trigger decide."

Dagger Johnny glanced at the crowd with his hand at the revolver to which it had leaped.

"What ef I refuse ter fight yer?" he asked with a sneer.

"Then, by the fires ov Tartarus! I'll paint yer pards with yer brains whar yer stand!" was the response, and Keen Kennard's revolver leaped into the ruffian's face.

"Is it fight or a dog's death?" he cried. "Be quick with yer choice."

Dagger Johnny jerked back and threw an imploring glance among the startled crowd.

"I'll take it all back!" he said. "I see thet I've been mistaken."

"Yer do?"

"Yes, Cap'n Bluff, this man isn't Keen Kennard. I see my mistake now. I beg yer pardon, Magic Merle."

Keen Kennard drew back.

"Good-night, gents," he said waving his hand to the crowd as he turned away.

"It's only a brief respite," he said to himself. "We've got to fight it out."

CHAPTER VIII.

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

SITTING on a horse not far from Red Eye Camp, and among the shadows of night, was the woman Vera, who had left the rough's retreat a few hours before.

"He came down upon me like a thunderbolt,

and when least expected," she said, when for the twentieth time she thought of Dropshot Bluff's visit to her cabin. "The skeleton game didn't frighten him very much, and my ventriloquism had but little effect. They found Grim George, of course, with the bullet in his head, and the mark of the brotherhood cut to pieces. The alcalde of Red Eye will take an oath of vengeance now, and I shall probably be hunted. Very well, Dropshot Bluff. If I am to be your quarry, I may prove a dangerous one. Beware! the tigress may turn on her hunters. The crime committed in Mormondom is still unavenged!"

Vera the Viper was not far from Red Eye when she spoke thus, and while she spoke she looked toward the camp, which of course was not visible.

"I didn't leave because of your hatred, Dropshot Bluff," she went on. "If I had desired to remain, the combined powers of yon accursed camp could not have ejected me. I can go back and stay there in spite of its alcalde. The time will come when I will go thither and laugh in the faces of its roughs and toughs. I didn't take up my abode in Red Eye for nothing."

The sorceress of the sierra rode slowly from the spot, but not far away she suddenly drew rein, and caught a silver-mounted six-shooter from her belt.

"One must watch," she said. "I am under the ban now. There is a dead man behind me who must be avenged. I must not forget this."

Moving to one side of the mountain trail, the woman waited for the horse whose hoofs her keen ears had heard.

The animal was approaching from the southwest, and a strange smile flitted over Vera's face while she waited with a good deal of impatience.

Almost suddenly the horse came into view, and at sight of him the sorceress threw out a hand and exclaimed:

"Halt! In the name of fortune, who are you?"

The rider from the southwest uttered a light exclamation of amazement, and reined in the horse.

A woman with a mask! The last person Vera the Viper expected to confront in that place.

"I didn't expect to meet a female robber here," said the masked person, and she followed the sentence with a laugh. "It is stand and deliver, I suppose?"

"It is nothing of the kind. I am no road-agent," was the answer, as the sorceress of Red Eye guided her steed alongside until she touched the masked one. "We have never met before. We need not be enemies."

"That is true. If I am not to be robbed, tell me how near I am to the camp called Red Eye Bar."

Vera started and looked into the eyes that glittered behind the silken mask.

They were black and full of fiery play, and she could see that the strange being possessed a splendid figure full of easy grace.

"Your mask makes a mystery of you," said Vera, not paying any attention to the inquiry. "I must tell you that mysteries fare poorly here. The only one that ever kept long is that which enshrouds the lost Ophir."

The masked woman could not repress a start and a cry.

"Then you know of it here?" she exclaimed. "It moves Red Eye. It is the pulse of the camp behind me."

"And it is as yet unsolved?"

"Yes, and may forever be."

"Not if I get a clew!" ejaculated the masked one. "See here! I don't know you."

"I am Vera, the Viper, for three years sorceress of Red Eye Bar."

"And I am Queen Moro. The agent I sent out last summer has failed. He has never reported progress. I was told that a better man than Keen Kennard, of Shasta, I could not get to help me in my hunt for the lost Ophir. Men lie though, you know." And the speaker laughed till the silk mask shook.

"Go down to Red Eye and feel its pulse," said Vera, waving her hand toward the camp. "You'll find a pretty set of men to play against there. You'll have for an antagonist Dropshot Bluff, Red Eye's big alcalde—a man whose whole life is bent on finding the missing mine. You'll see there the lost man of Gold Gorge."

"Gilbert Golden?" cried Queen Moro.

"Gilbert Golden and as crazy as a loon."

"Heavens, no!"

"He used to jabber about the mine; but he doesn't any more. He has forgotten it."

A sigh came from under the mask, but the next moment the strange woman darted forward and clutched the sorceress's arm.

"What clew has Dropshot Bluff?" she asked, eagerly. "Did he ever get anything out of the boy's ravings?"

"I think not. Certain papers, including a map which Gilbert drew up before he disappeared from Gold Gorge, were stolen. Since that they have discovered nothing else although they have turned the mad boy loose among the mountains and have followed him like a pack of bloodhounds. If you think you can find a clew where they have failed, you will find yourself greatly mistaken."

Queen Moro said nothing for a moment, during which time her hand dropped slowly from Vera's arm.

"I'll never go back without the Ophir," she said resolutely.

"Then you remain here."

"That is the opinion of a woman!"

"It is the belief of one who has a right to speak. Go down to Red Eye and tell Dropshot Bluff and pards that you are hunting the lost bonanza, and you won't stay six hours in camp. They've just got rid of one woman whom they kept three years under protest, and they'll never harbor another. I had to shed blood before I left. You may have to do the same."

"Whom did you kill?"

"Ask Red Eye's alcalde when you see him!" laughed Vera. "I say I had to kill him, and no person living had a better right to take that life than I."

"Won't they hunt you for it?"

"Let them! It will add spice to life in these parts to be hunted by a pack of men wolves like Dropshot Bluff and pards," laughed the sierra sorceress. "But I doubt whether vengeance can take them from the gold trail. I don't want to detain you here. If you have sworn never to go back without the lost bonanza I know of one oath that will be broken. If you will let me turn your horse's head, Queen Moro, you will live to thank Vera the Viper before the year is another week older."

"I am not to be daunted," was the flashed response. "You do not know the motive that urges me on. I want to use that gold to strike a blow that will inflict a wound as deep as that given by the dagger. Under my hunt for the lost Ophir lives a vengeance which I never forget! You tell me that Gilbert Golden is in Red Eye, but insane. I will get a clew from him. You intimate that the roughs of the camp will tolerate no rival on the trail. I will not stop for them! Vera the Viper, you must remember that the oath of Queen Moro is recorded against her where oaths are never forgotten. If Keen Kennard had not failed me, I would not be here to-night."

"I would like to have seen your agent."

"You never will. He has given up the hunt or he lies dead somewhere. If I find him I will probably shoot him on sight for failing to report. What is the name of the man you killed in Red Eye? Pardon me for seeking to know."

The sorceress hesitated. She had once told the masked woman to ask Dropshot Bluff, but here was the question again.

"Well, it was Grim George," said Vera looking straight at Queen Moro to note the effect of the words.

"Not the same Grim George who once was saint in Utah?" cried Queen Moro.

"The same man."

"In heaven's name why did you kill him?" she cried. "That man I could have made my ally by a glance. When you shot him, you lost me a friend."

"I can't help that," said Vera, smilingly. "You will find him under the mountain sod now. Saint in Utah, eh? He was devil in the same skin!"

"I don't doubt that, but I would almost give my right arm to-night, if Grim George was not dead."

"So you would make my foe my evil genius, your ally?" exclaimed the sorceress. "In that case, Queen Moro, whoever you are we would have been enemies in Red Eye. The friend of Dropshot Bluff and the ally of Grim George, the Mormon saint, cannot be my friend."

"I'm sorry," said Queen Moro with a sneer that made Vera's eyes flash. "I am here to get to the lost Ophir in spite of all flesh. Good-night, if you are not going back to Red Eye. I go alone. Thus far I have followed the gold trail—from the parlor to the sierra. I am going into the camp from which you are exiled. I may shed blood before my hunt ends. I shall not hesitate. It takes gold to play the game I would play when I go back to Frisco."

The speaker drew back and took up the reins.

"Heavens! what a woman!" exclaimed the sorceress. "I'd like to see the face she hides behind that mask. It must be no common one else why hide it here amid the sierra? By the eternal gods! I will look behind that silk. I don't care if I send her to Red Eye without her mask."

The gold huntress did not read Vera's resolution in the expression of her eyes; she was unprepared for the sudden *coup* that took place.

All at once the exiled sorceress of Red Eye darted straight at the masked woman, and the right hand clutched the silk mask before the action could be met.

"Hang your! I'll see behind you mask!" cried Vera the Viper. "Interfere with my determination, and I'll send you to Red Eye exposed!"

A wild cry pealed forth from Queen Moro's throat, and she caught the arm of the resolute woman. Then a fierce struggle on horseback began, Vera fighting to lift the mask, the mysterious woman battling to conceal her face.

The two steeds standing side by side permitted this battle to go on without interruption. Neither combatants thought of the weapons with which they were armed.

More than once the tigerish fury of Queen Moro tore Vera's hand from the mask and forced her back, but the sorceress always came forward to the struggle with renewed strength.

The stars were the only spectators of this strange battle, and they did not interfere.

"For mercy's sake, let me remain masked!" said Queen Moro, gasping at last, and at the mercy of her antagonist. "A sight of my face will do you no good—it cannot. Don't! don't! You are a woman. Pity me!"

"Not after this struggle," said Vera the Viper. "I have sworn to look into your face and I shall. If the lost Ophir were offered me to withdraw my resolution, I would reject it. The face! the face! I look behind your mask, Queen Moro!"

The sorceress of Red Eye had outwinded the strange woman of the black mask, and with the last word she clutched the silken covering and jerked it off.

A cry parted Queen Moro's lips. She threw her hands up to her face.

"Spare me this disgrace!" she cried. "If you refuse, woman, I'll hunt you down and kill you like a dog!"

Vera laughed derisively.

"I'll see if Tartarus gaps for the sorceress of the sierra!" she exclaimed, and then she madly jerked Queen Moro's hands away.

Resistance ceased then, and Vera leaned forward to look into the face she had exposed.

One look was enough.

"My God!" she cried, turning quickly away.

"Marked for life! I'd sooner be dead than have your face!"

The answer was a terrible groan.

What had the sorceress seen?

A face once beautiful, no doubt, but now so marked, so terribly defaced, that Vera rode away, with a shudder!

CHAPTER IX.

DAGGER JOHNNY'S TRIGGER.

LET us go back to Red Eye, reader.

Keen Kennard's remark that the trigger would have to be called in to test the superiority of man in the mountain camp, threatened to be realized before long.

The unexpected coming of Floss to Red Eye had put a new face on affairs there. The Shasta detective saw that the girl recognized him on sight, and he knew that his look had forced her into the falsehood she had uttered. He knew, too, that Dagger Johnny had also recognized him, but his prompt action and the revolver he had thrust into that worthy's face had made him swallow that assertion.

Affairs could not remain thus; the present quiet was only a lull before the storm, and Keen Kennard, when he walked away after subduing Dagger Johnny, saw that he was treading the brink of a very dangerous volcano.

His aim already decided on was to get Gilbert Golden away from Red Eye. The young man, clothed again in his right mind, knew the trail to the fabulous riches lost so many years; but there was no telling when he might go back into the terrible state of darkness and insanity.

But Floss had come to Red Eye, and a sight of her might excite Gilbert and put a summary end to the whole scheme.

The Shasta Shadow would have given a hand almost if the girl had not come. Fortune seemed against him.

In the scene about the wagon he had got a peep into Dagger Johnny's true character. The man was treacherous, cowardly when cornered, but a dangerous fellow withal. He would beg for mercy at sundown to deal a blow in the dark.

The man from Shasta left Floss in Dropshot Bluff's care and walked down to Gilbert's cabin. If the youth had not discovered the girl's presence in camp there was yet a chance to beat Red Eye without shedding blood.

"If they must meet it must be beyond the bounds of Red Eye and under my care," said the detective. "First, I will get Gilbert away. By the holy stars! I've got a grip on the monster bonanza, and I'm not going to let go!"

He soon reached the shanty sought for and the next moment was inside.

"Gilbert, my boy—"

He paused abruptly and looked around. The cabin was empty.

"Zounds! if he is outside he will discover her!" exclaimed Kennard. "He will show the alcalde that he is in his right mind again. He may even give the lost Ophir away."

The Shasta Sleuth whirled upon the door as the last words left his lips.

"This must not be. They must not meet here," he cried.

A long stride carried him to the door, and he was about to spring into the starlight when a figure confronted him, and he stood still.

"Why didn't you tell me?" said the person who clutched Kennard's arm. "She was near all the time and you knew it. I have seen her. Floss has found me at last, no thanks to you, Magic Merle."

The eyes of the young gold-hunter emitted a strange light.

"Now that I have found Floss, my early playmate, what do I care for the lost Ophir?"

the boy went on. "I can give the secret to Red Eye and settle back with Floss. She is better than gold, ha! ha! Magic Merle, I don't owe you anything. You kept the girl back. She must have broken away from you and come to Red Eye."

The mountain detective looked amazed into Gilbert's face. He could not suppress his thoughts.

"Don't be a fool," he cried. "You'll play a thundering poor game, if you give the secret to the tigers of Red Eye. God knows how the girl got here, I don't. She says she drove to Red Eye in the dilapidated wagon you may have seen down the street. Yes, that girl is Floss—Floss Mogalle. I didn't know she was nearer than Sacramento, when I told you about her. I left her there months ago in the clutches of the mysterious woman called Queen Moro. I am in that woman's employ to a certain extent, but the hand that harms Floss stirs me up. Don't be a fool, I say."

Gilbert gazed into Keen Kennard's eyes, and muttered:

"We have promised to be friends and pards, I know that; but, as I have said, I don't care a snap for the gold secret now. I've been losing it again ever since you went away."

"You don't mean that, Gilbert?"

"I do! If you had let me draw the map, when I woke up in my right mind, as you know, you would have it now; but I'm losing it again."

Keen Kennard uttered a cry of disappointment.

"This will never do!" he exclaimed. "Gilbert, my boy, you must not lose it now! You shall give it to me before it entirely vanishes. We'll shut the door and go to work."

The man from Shasta suited the action to the word; he shut the door and placed the little lamp on the table.

"I saved the piece of chalk found on the floor the other time," he said, placing the little white object in Gilbert's hand. "Now, go to work. Draw the route on the table, here. I will transfer it to my head as you work."

Gilbert seated himself on the stool which the detective had drawn up to the table, and took the chalk between thumb and finger.

"Go on!" said Kennard. "Remember that the morning will come, and don't forget that this is Red Eye Bar."

Gilbert took his eyes from the detective's face, and turned slowly to his task. He acted like a person whose mind was losing its grasp on something he was striving hard to retain. More than once, he passed one hand across his forehead, and slowly shook his head.

The big detective stood over him in the lamp-light anxious and silent.

Suddenly Gilbert's hand dropped upon the table and he began to draw. Keen Kennard bent over his shoulder, and watched the lines the chalk made.

Tortuous and meaningless lines they were at first, but as the diagram advanced, the man from Shasta saw that they took definite shape, and became a map of some region, which he vowed he would discover.

Gilbert kept on until the map seemed complete.

When he paused he looked up into the detective's face with a self-satisfied smile.

"I couldn't have held it much longer," he said. "It was nearly gone from me when I began."

The lost man of Gold Gorge settled back exhausted. His face did not possess a particle of color.

"It is all there but your compass points," said Keen Kennard, grasping the youth's wrist.

"Aha! did I overlook that important thing?" ejaculated Gilbert. "Well, here they are, Magic Merle," and with the chalk he made the valuable acquisition.

"Let me study that map a moment," said the detective. "I'll get it into my head as a whole to be dissected at leisure."

Gilbert leaned forward and bowed his face between his arms, while Keen Kennard began to study the map.

Suddenly in the midst of this scene there rung out a startling shot, and the giant form of the Shasta detective leaped up and reeled away!

Gilbert Golden sprang up with a wild cry. He saw the man from Shasta sink at the foot of the cabin wall, but the next moment he got up and started toward the table.

"Blot it out! blot it out!" he exclaimed. "For Heaven's sake!"

The broken sentence seemed his last, and when the horrified youth had obliterated the gold map by one sweep of his right arm, Keen Kennard lay on the floor like a dead man.

All this in the space of half a minute!

"When he kivers me ag'in an' forces me to take water, by Jupiter! he'll know it!" grated the man outside, who turned away with a smoking revolver. "What Dagger Johnny knows, he knows! It war a bad day that sot yer down in Red Eye, Keen Kennard."

Still clutching the weapon, the alcalde's pard stalked down the street and into Dropshot Bluff's cabin.

"Wal, I've settled with him," he said, confronting the alcalde. "They don't make Dag-

ger Johnny lie for nothin', cap'n. I got ther dead drop on old sharp-eye an' fetched 'im ther first shot."

"What hev you done?"

"Wiped out Kennard from Shasta! I found 'im in Gilbert's cabin. Ther boy war drawin' suthin' for him on ther table—"

"Jehosaphat! ther map!—ther trail ter Ophir!" yelled Dropshot Bluff, rushing toward the door.

"He drew it once for me, but took a crazy spell an' rubbed it out. Mebbe he added ther compass p'int to ther map for ther Shasta gold-hound!"

"Ye'd better wait," said Dagger Johnny clutching the alcalde's arm and holding him back.

"Not a minute! I've waited years already!" was the answer and Dropshot Bluff jerked loose from his pard and rushed out.

"Hang me ef I go back thar," cried the alcalde's pard. "I'll stay hyer an' wait for his report. Ef ther war ther Ophir trail Gilbert war drawin' for Keen Kennard, by Morpheus! I didn't shoot 'im a second too soon. Mebbe it'll be ther means ov gettin' us on ther right trail at last. I've lived like Lazarus lo! these many years, an' ef my revolver gives me a grip ov a bonanza I'll canonize it, by Jupiter!"

Dagger Johnny settled back upon the alcalde's stool and laid a revolver upon the table within easy reach. He did not know what might happen after shooting a man like Keen Kennard; he was not sure that the Shasta detective had not come alone to Red Eye, and, under the circumstances, he thought it best to be prepared for an emergency.

Three minutes had barely passed when Dagger Johnny was startled from his seat by the sudden bursting of a man into the cabin.

It was Dropshot Bluff out of breath and cursing like a sailor.

"Thar's nobody thar!" were the first intelligible words he put together.

Dagger Johnny uttered a cry of unbelief.

"Nobody?" he echoed.

"Nobody, dead nor livin'!" said the alcalde. "Ar' ye sure ye dropped anybody?"

"Am I sure I'm in California?" cried the thunderstruck rough. "Didn't I see 'im tumble when I touched ther trigger? When did Dagger Johnny fail on his man at twenty steps?"

"Wal, ther cabin's empty," said the alcalde. "I found ther table standin' all right, but ther map warn't thar."

Dagger Johnny looked mystified.

"This blamed camp ain't bewitched," he said. "Ther witch is gone. A dead man can't get away without help. Ther's one ov ther impossibilities."

"Then you think ther Gilbert took ther Shasta Sleuth away?"

"Yes, ter bury him somewhar. Who knows but ther my sudden shot's thrown ther youth off his balance ag'in?"

"It might hev done it. Come! We'll inquire inter this."

The two pards left the cabin.

"We'll see how ther girl gits along in her wagon," said Dropshot Bluff. "She would sleep thar ter-night. I set ther boys on ther watch for fear ther hosses might move off on ther own account, yer know."

Dagger Johnny followed the alcalde to the spot where the little old wagon which had carried Floss to Red Eye still stood under the stars.

Quiet reigned about the vehicle, and the closely-drawn curtains told that the girl slept after the exciting events which had followed her introduction to Red Eye society.

The two men approached on tiptoe, the burly sombreroed figure of Dropshot Bluff in the lead, and at last the bronzed hand of the alcalde lifted the side curtain.

The interior of the wagon was dark, and he had to satisfy his curiosity by listening.

"She's thar yet, cap'n," said a voice at Dropshot's elbow, and he saw the figure of a Red Eye rough at his side. "We haven't taken eyes off ther vehicle since yer went away. Ther wild rose ther winds an' them hosses fetched inter camp, still blooms fer Red Eye."

"All right, Duncan," responded the alcalde, dropping the curtain as he slipped back. "Remember that she's under my care. The man what touches Floss touches Dropshot Bluff!"

"What's that, sir?" said a voice. "Does that wagon contain a person named Floss?"

The three men turned and looked up into the speaker's face.

A masked woman sat in the saddle before them.

"Look, cap'n! Vera, ther sorceress, has come back with her face kivered!" exclaimed Dagger Johnny.

"No, not Vera. Gentlemen of Red Eye, my mission here is not one of blood; but I tell you plainly that I am not to be disobeyed. I want to see the occupant of that wagon."

"Cracky! A hummer from Hummersville!" said Dagger Johnny.

Dropshot Bluff looked at the woman on the horse, and then put on his boldest face.

"I don't know about this," he said, moving a step nearer the wagon, as if to shield its fair tenant with his giant figure. "I reckon we run this sierra shebang. We've taken keer ov it a

long time, my saddle witch, an' we're capable ov continuin' ther job."

What would have followed this grated defiance will never be known, but just as the alcalde of Red Eye finished, a small hand lifted the curtain from the inside and a face appeared.

The woman in the saddle leaned suddenly forward.

"Heaven! you here, Floss?" she exclaimed.

"Queen Moro!" cried the girl. "God above! I thought I was beyond your clutches forever. Men of Red Eye, that woman is my deadly enemy."

"You touch Floss at yer peril, then!" growled the big alcalde.

CHAPTER X.

A STUBBORN GUEST.

DROPSHOT BLUFF had the best of backing, and the two men who stood beside him, laid their hands on their revolvers, and glared at the masked woman on horseback.

"Thet girl came ter Red Eye in thet rig, an' she's goin' ter be protected in her right ter remain thar," continued the alcalde. "Ef you ar' her enemy, as she says, you don't want ter play a bold hand ag'in' her hyer!"

Queen Moro looked from the speaker to the face framed by the curtain of the wagon, and then back again.

"It makes but little difference to me," she said. "I have ever been her enemy, though, and she shall remain here till death, for aught I care. So this is Red Eye?"

"Red Eye Bar!" said Dropshot. "We don't like mysteries," and he looked hard at the silk mask. "P'raps you'd better jine ther sorceress, we've lately exiled."

"If I did, it would be to kill her!" hissed Queen Moro. "Do you drive me from Red Eye?"

"No, not that," answered the alcalde. "We don't want any new inhabitants, though. You may remain awhile on condition thet you don't bother ther beauty ov ther wagon."

"I shall not notice her, for that matter. My mission hither is not to find her."

The curtains dropped at this moment, and Floss disappeared.

"Has she taken to the trail herself?" exclaimed the young girl, in the darkness that once more surrounded her. "She could not wait for Keen Kennard's report. She is hunting for the lost Ophir in person. What will she say when she confronts the Shasta detective in Red Eye? I wish I could post him. I wish I could tell Gilbert, if he is here, that the most dangerous woman in California is on the gold trail."

The girl listened and heard the parties outside move away.

"If I but knew the mysteries of this camp, I would undertake to warn Keen Kennard and Gilbert," she went on. "All is strange to me here. A singular fortune brought me hither. Heaven knows what will happen before I depart."

If she could have taken a view of objects outside, she would have seen Queen Moro's horse being led away by Dagger Johnny. The alcalde had whispered: "To Grim George's," to his right bower, and thither Queen Moro was being conducted.

"It isn't a crystal palace, madam," said the Red Eye rough when he had halted in front of the little shanty. "It war Grim's house ther other day, but he's given it up fer a residence on ther mountain-side. As Red Eye never entertains anybody, we never built a hotel. Walk in; ye'll find a lamp an' a bed. Yer hoss I'll leave out hyer."

Queen Moro who had already alighted looked once at the cabin and then turned upon Dagger Johnny.

"How old is this camp?" she asked.

"I can't exactly tell yer. We left Gold Gorge—let me see—"

The woman uttered a light cry.

"That will do," she said. "Gold Gorge, eh?"

"Yes, an' we hev'n't found thet rascally bonanza yet!" laughed Dagger Johnny. "Ef thet's what ye'r after, madam, let us say thet ye might as well go back. We've never been able ter get anything out o' ther boy, though ther cap'n claims ter hev been on ther edge ov ther secret once."

"When was he there?" asked the woman.

"Ther other night. I think it war."

"And it slipped through his fingers? ha! ha!"

"Yes, pretty much like an eel."

Dagger Johnny stepped back and left Queen Moro alone. She watched him glide away until his figure was lost and then she turned to the cabin.

"Two desires burn me like red-hot irons," she said to herself. "I want the life of the woman called Vera the Viper, and I want the secret this camp holds. For which shall I strike first? I'll go in here and collect my thoughts."

Three minutes later the strange woman wearing still the mask the sorceress had lifted entered the cabin and found a stool and table in the gloom that reigned there. Seating herself on the former she bowed her head and gave way to deep thought.

She did not hear the footstep that approached.

the cabin; she did not see the man who glided up to it and listened.

"Hang me, ef I want her in camp," said this individual, who had the burly figure of Dropshot Bluff the alcalde. "We've just got rid ov one sorceress an' hyer another one comes. Vera killed as she went away, but by Heaven! this one sha'n't! Ther questions she asked Dagger Johnny give her mission away. She hunts ther big Ophir. Her trail is Red Eye's. We won't have any rival in this gold-hunt. She shall not stay!"

Thus in low but determined tones spoke the man who listened at the cabin door near which stood the horse that had carried the masked woman into camp.

"Mebbe I'd better serve notice on 'er quietly an' at once," he went on. "Arter that we'll hunt Gilbert an' Keen Kennard, shot by Johnny. This woman who is called Queen Moro shall understand that men kin run this camp. Dropshot Bluff late ov Mormondom is master hyer. Interlopers will please take notice!"

The alcalde of Red Eye stepped to the door as he finished and laid his big hand gently upon it. The latch already raised and he opened it slowly.

Darkness greeted him.

"I am here," said a voice. "I thought you would come, Dropshot Bluff. Take a seat till I light the lamp I have just found. This is Grim's cabin, eh?—the man your sorceress lately killed."

The alcalde of Red Eye exhibited amazement on his countenance; but before he spoke the glimmer of a match broke the gloom and he saw the figure of Queen Moro.

"This is Grim's," he said. "Yes, Vera ther Viper shot him dead, but we'll cancel ther debt afore long."

With the lamp between them the boss of Red Eye saw the splendid figure of Queen Moro, and the black mask that hid her face.

"I'm not hyer ter ask whar ye'r from," he said, "I didn't come ter pry inter any secrets ye may hev fetched ter camp. I'm only hyer ter say that ther pards ov this camp kin run it."

Dropshot Bluff thought he detected a quick flash in the eyes behind the mask while he spoke but he was not sure.

"I am not here to interfere with the management of Red Eye," was the answer.

"Then show yer face an' let us see what ye'r like."

Queen Moro seemed to recoil a foot.

"Hit yer hard thet time, eh?" laughed the alcalde. "We don't need masked women hyer. This is no Mexican fandango town. This is ther only Red Eye in existence, an' I am its alcalde."

There was no mistaking the language conveyed by the last sentence. It meant that the days of the masked women in Red Eye had already been numbered.

"Business is business, madam," Dropshot Bluff went on coolly. "I never talk in riddles when I kin pick up plain English. We've decided that we don't want yer hyer."

What could be plainer than this? The blunt words had their effect; the eyes of Queen Moro did flash.

"Thet's ther heft ov it," continued the big alcalde moving toward the cabin door and giving the masked woman a look which added interest to the command to quit Red Eye. "Yer hoss stands outside. Ye'll be safer elsewhar than in this camp."

"Halt there, Dropshot Bluff!" said the woman. "I came here for no quarrel. I have turned the girl in the wagon over to you for the sake of peace. I am to be ordered from Red Eye before I have had an hour's rest, am I? Very well. What more shall I expect from the deposed saint of Mormondom?"

Dropshot Bluff started as if a serpent had hissed suddenly at his feet.

"What's thet insinuation?" he cried, springing at the woman who had drawn her figure to its true height.

"I only said something about a deposed saint of Mormondom—it was nothing much!" laughed Queen Moro.

"Did yer mean me?"

"From the effect of my remark one would say that the sentence stung."

"I hev been in Mormondom," said Dropshot Bluff. "Thar's precious few places in ther West an' Southwest whar I hev'n't been. But thet is not hyer. You must leave Red Eye forthwith."

"It's a repetition of the famous order, dated July 10th, 1867."

A wild cry drove the alcalde's lips apart, and, staggering to the door, he glared at the cool woman like a tiger forced to the corner of his cage by brute superiority.

Dropshot Bluff, when I reached this camp I had no idea that it contained the man I now face," continued Queen Moro, coming around the table and facing the alcalde. "I had heard of Dropshot Bluff before, but how could I know that he and the deposed and hunted saint of Utah were identical. It is nothing to me to know how long you have been wearing this mask. I know all about the crime that shocked even Mormondom, wicked as it is. I know that the oath-bound Gentiles have lost your trail, but

that if they found it to-day they would have your blood at the end of it. You have buried yourself from vengeance in the depths of the sierra, the saint has turned alcalde, and Salt Lake has been exchanged for Red Eye Bar. My mission in these parts is not to hunt you, but you may go too far with the order to quit this camp. I guess we'll quit here and call it even. Drive me from Red Eye and I may not stop this side the Gentile League!"

Dropshot Bluff heard these words with his back against the door.

"Shoot me for a possum! ef I hev'n't stirred up a tigress," he muttered. "I'd give a thousand ter look behind thet mask. She knows more than she shall keep an' live. I don't want ther Gentile League at my heels now. I had it thar once. This woman stings when she talks. Ef I drive her away I send her ter my banded enemies, eh? I'll see to thet, but she leaves Red Eye all the same."

He put his hand behind him and touched the latch.

"Remember!" said the woman. "Drive me from Red Eye before I want to go and you send me to the avenging League whose oath taken over the dead is unfulfilled to-day. I shall not trouble you long, Dropshot Bluff. My trail led me into this camp. It promises to lead beyond it. The girl in the wagon I will not interfere with, though I am the deadly enemy of her kith and kin! Ah! you are going, I see. I have but one parting word: 'Remember!'"

"I'll do thet, bet yer life!" said the alcalde. "I couldn't forget you ef I tried. By Jupiter! ye'r a greater pest than ther sorceress war."

He opened the door with the hand he had put behind him and bounded away so quickly that Queen Moro started, to find herself alone.

"Drive her out, eh? I'll do even worse than that!" cried the mad alcalde, sending a fierce look over his shoulder. "'Desperate remedies for desperate diseases' has been my doctrine all through life. This is a hard case, an' ef I don't prescribe ther proper medicine inside ov an hour, I'll give up my diploma!"

Bluff went back to the wagon and its beautiful occupant. All was quiet there and Duncan was still on guard.

"Ef ye hear a singular cry don't stir, Duncan," said the alcalde looking down in the guard's face. "On no account let nothin' draw yer from yer post," then he glided off before the surprised sentry could put in a question.

"Cap'n, I've a bit o' news," said Dagger Johnny who suddenly appeared before the alcalde. "Gilbert's come back!"

"Without the man you shot?"

"Yes. He took Keen Kennard away an' buried him somewhar in ther mountain. Ther boy is now in his shanty tryin' ter wash blood-stains from his clothes."

"Thet's all right, Johnny. Ther secret ov ther big Ophir is safe yet. But I hev work for you. What would yer do ter an individual thet came ter Red Eye ter break it up an' send me back ter Utah under guard?"

"I'd drop him in his tracks!" was the prompt response.

"What ef thet person war a woman?"

"Thet wouldn't stop me."

"Thet's what we've got ter do. Come with me. We go down before Grim George's shanty an' holler 'fire!' When ther door opens an' exposes a face, as it will, we shoot once a piece."

Johnny nodded obedience.

CHAPTER XI.

COERCED AND TRACKED.

SHOULDER to shoulder Dropshot and his pard walked toward the cabin in which but a few minutes before the alcalde had left Queen Moro.

"Confound that masked mystery!" growled the chief of Red Eye. "She turns up jest when we don't want ter be interfered with. Came from Sacramento, I jedge, from what I've found out, heard ov me in Utah, and says that ther Gentile League ain't disbanded thar."

"Ther deuce!" exclaimed Johnny, throwing a look of amazement into Dropshot's face. "Mebbe she's ther League's spy."

"Thet's about whar I'm beginnin' ter place her. Ef I could see behind thet close-fittin' mask I'd know her, p'r'aps. Ther League's spy, eh? By heavens! thet sends my blood b'ilin' through my veins. Remember! that woman must never leave Red Eye alive. She hes found me, an' thet's reason enough."

"Whatever you do fer Red Eye or for Dropshot Bluff, you'll find Dagger Johnny on hand!" was the reply.

Nobody seemed to see the two men as they moved quietly down the silent street of the sierra camp and took up their station in front of Grim George's shanty in which not a ray of light was visible.

The big alcalde tiptoed it across the street and listened near the door a minute, then rejoined his pard.

"It's as still in thar as when I invaded ther cabin awhile ago," he whispered. "She's put out ther light since I left. Forward ter ther middle ov ther street. Hyer we ar'. Ar' yer ready?"

"Ready!" said Dagger Johnny cocking the re-

volver he had drawn. "Shall I give ther false alarm, cap'n?"

"Yes, she might know my voice."

The next moment the alcalde's pard inflated his lungs and then, "Fire! fire!" rung out on the calm night air.

It was a cry that penetrated to the remotest corners of Red Eye Bar, and at the hour it was delivered, it had a thrilling sound.

A strange silence followed the last utterance. The two pards stood together like statues, their eyes fastened on the cabin door, and their fingers at the triggers of the deadliest revolvers in the sierra.

"Hang it it all! ther cry has no charms for her," whispered Dagger Johnny.

"Let it slip again."

"Fire! fire! fire!" shot from the pard's lungs.

Dropshot Bluff bit his lips and looked non-plused.

"Mebbe ther shanty doesn't hold her," he said. "I'll see in a moment."

When he bounded toward the cabin he had Dagger Johnny at his heels. The alcalde laid his hand on the door and threw it open. At the same time his companion struck a match.

"Ther bird has flown!" the alcalde exclaimed glancing around the empty cabin. "If she has broken for Mormondom, woe to her, I say. She is surely ther spy ov ther Gentile League. She thinks she has reached ther end ov her hunt in Red Eye. Foller ther horse from ther door. I have other business elsewhar."

"What ef I find her?"

"Shoot ther Gentile witch on sight!" was the retort. "Thar must be no half-way business now. Don't come ter me till you've found her. Foller her ter Utah—only kill her afore she gives me away ter ther League."

Dropshot Bluff was excited; he did not wait for his man to hesitate; he would not have heard a remonstrance.

Before Dagger Johnny could collect his thoughts, the mad alcalde was striding away.

"I don't like ther job but it's go er look inter ther muzzle ov Dropshot's six-shooter," he muttered. "He had 'er afore him awhile ago. Why didn't he kill ther spy ov ther Gentile League. I don't more'n half believe that she's a spy. I made her start when I mentioned ther lost Ophir. I've got ter track her, though—mebbe ter Mormondom whar I have no business ov importance."

With very little enthusiasm Dagger Johnny set to work and found without great trouble hoof-tracks in the dust of Red Eye's one street. They led toward the western terminus of the camp and while Dropshot Bluff was walking toward his own shanty, Johnny was following the fresh trail.

All at once the trailer stopped and then recoiled. He had almost walked against a horse that stood alongside a certain cabin, and it was with difficulty that he suppressed the exclamation that leaped to his lips.

"Found already?" ejaculated Dagger Johnny. "By Jehu! this is a long ways this side ov Mormondom. I'm in luck. I have run down the masked spy ov the Gentile League an' thet in Red Eye."

Dagger Johnny had already recognized the cabin before which the horse stood, and his face was a curious picture as he approached the little window beyond which glimmered a light.

The next minute the alcalde's pard straightened beside the door and looked in upon a scene that surprised him.

The first figure he saw was that of the masked guest of Red Eye Bar standing erect beside a young man who occupied a stool at the table.

"Holy Moses! what a chance for carryin' out ther cap'n's orders!" exclaimed ther Red Eye pard half lifting the revolver still clutched in his hand. "I could spile ther face under thet mask an' by touchin' a trigger deprive ther League ov its spy. She's got ther boy cornered; she took him unawares—pounced down upon 'im like an eagle."

Fast upon Dagger Johnny's last word came a voice from Gilbert as he looked up at the cool, glittering eyes that regarded him.

"I could do you no good, I tell you," he said. "The whole thing has passed from me. There have been times when it was in my head, clear and distinct, but all is jumbled now. You can find it as soon without me as if I were by your side. For Heaven's sake, let me stay!"

"No. In the mountains it will come back, if it has really left you," was the reply. "Gilbert Golden, I cannot tell you how I have longed to look into the face of the lost man of Gold Gorge. I have found you at last, and my sworn duty will not let you slip through my hands."

"Show me your face first. Let me see who wants the riches of the lost mine worse than I do."

The woman seemed to recoil.

"Not for a thousand Ophirs!" she cried. "I am no beauty, though—I can tell you that, Gilbert. We will find the mine together, and I will divide."

"No; I stay here."

"Because Floss has come, eh?" suddenly laughed the woman. "You are going with me now, Gilbert. The girl—may Heaven curse her and her kin!—is safe here till you come

back. Come! To the lost bonanza of California!"

Gilbert Golden sprung up as the hand of the strange woman alighted on his shoulder, as if the touch possessed an electric thrill.

"Spare me this useless trip!" he cried. "I tell you that the map of the mine, carried so long in my mind, is all jumbled. It is like a spider's web torn down and thrown together. I can never separate the threads."

"You have done it before, you acknowledge. Why not again? I am not here for play, Gilbert Golden; I am here for work. If I were to expose my future schemes, you would stand there and turn pale. Come on, I say. My horse is at the door. To the El Dorado seen by you once. It must be found again!"

Gilbert Golden stood like a person unable to move in the presence of the masked woman.

"If I thought I could ever find it—"

"Pshaw! we'll do that!" interrupted Queen Moro, with a laugh. "The moment we find it, you shall go back to Floss. I must have the lost Ophir for revenge. Don't make me use harsh means, Gilbert. I have nothing against the lost man of Gold Gorge, but I have sworn that no life shall stand between me and the bonanza. If you utterly refuse to go with me, the secret will never come back to you for the benefit of the watching vultures of this camp. Death, Gilbert, will never straighten the jumbled lines!"

The boy, for boyish the youth looked, despite his elegant, manly stature, saw the hand of the woman tighten on the silver-mounted revolver she held. There was "shoot" in the dark eyes back of the heavy silk mask.

"You will go?" continued the woman. "There, that's a sensible boy. It will come back to you among the mountains; the secret will be found there."

"The mine may be far away."

"Distance shall never balk us. Ah! we're off now."

Gilbert Golden found himself being pushed gently toward the cabin door, by the cool being who had swooped suddenly and unexpectedly upon him. He seemed to have lost the power of resisting.

"Zounds! she charms him like a serpent charms the bird!" ejaculated the man who had witnessed all this. "Now, what shall I do? My orders are to drop that woman on sight, but hyer's a chance ter get at ther secret we're growin' gray for. What are yer goin' ter do, Dagger Johnny? Which horn ov ther dilemma are yer goin' ter take? Ye've got ter make up yer mind in ther flash ov an eye."

The alcalde's pard drew back in the deep shadow of the cabin, and almost forgot that he clutched a revolver in his excitement.

Queen Moro and her prisoner were at the door.

"Dropshot or ther secret?—which? I feel like a feller decidin' between rope an' bullet. Why war I put on this confounded trail anyhow?"

He might have touched the masked woman by taking a step forward, but he did not move.

"Here is the horse," said Queen Moro addressing Gilbert. "Get up into the saddle, and at the peril of your life play me false! I don't want your blood, Gilbert, but you must not try me."

The youth obeyed, and still undecided, Dagger Johnny saw him climb into the saddle.

"Let me tell you for the last time, woman—"

"Silence!" said Queen Moro. "I know that the secret will come back to you among the mountains. Not another word!"

She laid her hand on the steed's bridle, and led him away.

The start roused Dagger Johnny, and that worthy sprung forward, to find the horse and his rider between him and the Queen of the Mask.

"I'll give ther secret a chance," he said. "Ef it fails ter come back ter Gilbert, I'll carry out Dropshot's instructions. Ef he gets a grip on it ag'in, why he shall guide Dagger Johnny ter ther lost Ophir. I can't fail twice."

The horse moved slowly away with the alcalde's right bower, a creeping shadow at his heels. Down the street and beyond the camp and toward the towering mountains it led Dagger Johnny.

The night seemed to grow darker among the ghostly pines, and this drew the tracker closer to his prey.

He could just see the outlines of the party he tracked; he knew that, watched by the black eyes of the masked huntress, and perhaps covered by her revolver, Gilbert Golden was riding into the wooded heart of the sierra.

"Jehosaphat! what ef ther secret should come back ter him!" ejaculated Dagger Johnny more than once. "It tumbles my heart inter my throat ter think ov such a thing. But what if he should rekiver it an' nobody by but thet merciless she-tigress—ther masked spy ov ther Gentile League, as Dropshot calls her? I wouldn't miss this trail for a cool thousand plump in my hand. By Jupiter! Dagger Johnny, yer' in luck! What's yer hand but a daisy flush!"

Down the wild trail, with the little cabins of

Red Eye already far behind, deeper and deeper into the mountains.

Dagger Johnny had trailed big game before, for he had the step of the cat, the noiseless body movement of the panther.

All at once, without a warning of any kind, a hand clutched Dagger Johnny's arm.

"See here," said a voice. "Aren't you out of your latitude?"

The man stopped, leaned forward, and cried: "I'm not, Grim George! Don't stop me hyer!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLOOD-SOAKED MAP.

"SHE'S thar yet, wagon an' all; with ther big bonanza, what a prize she is! Dagger Johnny will foller ther masked woman till he gits a chance ter carry out my instructions. He isn't as good as Grim George war, perhaps, but I kin trust him."

Dropshot Bluff, the big alcalde, spoke in this strain while he stood in the door of his cabin, from which he could see the covered wagon which had carried Floss into Red Eye.

The eventful night had given place to another day, and the morning light revealed the vehicle and its surroundings.

The girl still slept, and the guard who had watched through the night had finally left his post.

The eyes of the boss of Red Eye glittered while he spoke. In the fair young girl who had come to Red Eye he beheld a prize worth playing for.

"It'll be nothin' ter beat ther youngster," Dropshot went on with a light chuckle of delight. "He will yet lead us ter ther lost riches, an' then I'll coolly toss 'im ter one side while I appropriate both ther mine an' thet daisy in ther wagon. What a society queen she'd make with Ophir back ov her!"

Eager to see once more and in the broad light of day the face that looked so lovely in match-light, the alcalde of Red Eye walked to where the wagon stood and raised the curtain.

"Good-mornin', Miss Floss," he exclaimed bowing to the young girl who was wide awake arranging her simple toilet. "This is Red Eye ther capital ov these diggin's, not as big as Sacramento, nor as lively; but we've got a town hyer thet we're proud ov. Welcome ter Red Eye! Yer friend ov last night has left camp."

"Queen Moro?" cried Floss.

"Yes, an' she's not comin' back either," was the answer. "We have no use fer such timber in Red Eye."

Floss let slip a breath of relief.

The mystery of Sacramento was gone already. She would not have to face her again.

"That woman," she cried, "is my enemy. I don't know why. She hates all my kin."

"What's her face like?" asked the alcalde.

"I don't know for I never saw it. She hides it from me as if it were a hideous spectacle. I never dared to look under the mask she wears."

"Where did you first meet her?"

"In Sacramento years ago. My father, Max Mogalle, went to the mines and never came back. Gilbert knows that, for he was his companion. By and by I heard that four out of five men had perished on the trail of a mine of fabulous wealth. Gilbert the surviving one came back to Gold Gorge a lunatic. Before this I was taken charge of by this masked woman on the authority of a letter from the person to whose care father left me when he went away. I have reasons for believing that that letter was a forgery. My home in Sacramento was an elegant one, but Queen Moro kept me there. I learned to fear her. I was watched like a hawk, not by her all the time, but by two mutes who knew nothing but obedience to her. Whenever she came she always wore that mask."

"At last I managed to escape. My life in that house had become a living death. I believed that trace of my father was to be found. I might even find Gilbert. Imbued with this belief, I at last gave my dumb watchers the slip. I got out of Sacramento after several days and began my hunt. A party of prospectors took me with them to the mountains. I was asked, implored a thousand times to turn back, but I would not. From camp to camp and from trail to trail I went, sometimes alone, sometimes with a guide. By merest chance I found the site of Gold Gorge Camp. That encouraged me. I pushed on, now in this wagon drawn by the two miserable horses that brought me here. Fortune must have guided me after all; but heavens! has that masked tigress been on my track? From what I learned last night I am not far from Gilbert. I will hear from his lips the fate of my father. He is not mad now, I hope."

Dropshot Bluff who had not interrupted the girl's story during its narration, hardly knew what to say.

"Don't tell me that he is not here," she went on. "I have dared everything to find him. You have called him the lost man of Gold Gorge; but he is lost no longer. Gilbert has been found!"

"Mebbe, arter all she'll get ther map out o' him," muttered the alcalde. "It all depends on

thet. It won't be hard ter tear 'em apart when I want ter. Dagger Johnny reported last night thet ther boy hed come back."

Then he looked at Floss and said:

"Gilbert is hyer!"

The girl uttered a cry of delight.

"We'll hunt him up right away," he said as he assisted her from the wagon. "You'll find Red Eye squar' in every respect; all goods hyer a full yard wide, girl."

Walking beside the eager girl, Dropshot Bluff led the way to the cabin occupied by Gilbert Golden and knocked on the door. Of course there was no reply.

"We'll see about this," said the alcalde in no good humor. "By Jove! when thar's a lady in the case, we want no foolishness."

He opened the door and looked in. The cabin was empty. Floss gave utterance to a cry of disappointment and looked up into Dropshot Bluff's face in search of an explanation.

"He war hyer last night," said the alcalde of Red Eye. "We'll have ter wait, girl."

"When will he come?"

"Probably before sunup."

Floss went back to the wagon. She gently refused an offer to domicile herself in one of the cabins, saying that the poor wagon had been "home" to her for many days, and that she would keep it till Gilbert came.

"She's a curious creature, but what a daisy!" ejaculated Dropshot Bluff when he left her.

"Whar did ther boy go ter? It cannot be thet he knows thet ther girl's in camp. He didn't go away with thet female spy? Pshaw! what foolishness!"

The day waned and Gilbert did not come back. Floss grew tired of watching and the big alcalde avoided her questions.

What had become of Gilbert?

"We can't afford ter lose thet chap!" exclaimed Dropshot Bluff in the midst of the assembled pards of Red Eye. "In his head lies our only hopes of ever touchin' ther big bonanza. We've waited for years on his vagaries. Now and then the secret comes back to him in full power and leaves 'im as suddenly. He's liable to take one of them knowledge spells at any time. What if he should wander off and locate it alone! Jewhizz! just let thet thought get a firm grip on yer, men. What if Gilbert should locate Ophir, when none ov us war trailin' him?"

The suggestion drew exclamations of horror from the alcalde's auditors.

"We lost him once at Gold Gorge an' broke up camp an' follered him. We have ter hunt him ag'in, I guess. Thet boy can't be lost long!"

"But Red Eye? we can't break it up now," and the speakers glanced significantly at the wagon that contained the new arrival.

"No," said Bluff, "an' then he might wander back. We can't wait another minute for his return on his own accord. Gilbert must be trailed; he must be found!"

That was the opinion of all.

Dropshot Bluff then proceeded to parcel the pards of Red Eye into hunting parties. They were to scour the mountains for the missing youth worth so much with his wild secret to the camp. He had been hunted down once before, why not now?

The sun was beginning to drop westward, when three parties stole from Red Eye Bar for the search. They had received their last instructions from Dropshot Bluff, who was to remain behind, the camp's guard and Floss's companion.

The girl was assured that Gilbert would be found and brought back.

"He will not know me if he comes back insane," she said, excitedly.

"Oh, it doesn't last long," was the reply. "A sleep is liable ter bring him back to his senses, an' then he'll call yer Floss. He'll give us ther clew ter Ophir, mebbe."

"Always gold—gold!" said Floss, with a smile.

"Thet's ther magic word in Californy, girl!" laughed the alcalde. "It has exiled this whole camp. We've all been hangin' on Gilbert's lips for years, an' we're still poor as Lazarus. Hang it all! why didn't fortune smile on us long ago? Waitin' on a secret locked up in a boy's head—thet's been ther song for months!"

"A secret which may amount to nothing when told."

"No! I believe it as I believe I live!" cried Dropshot Bluff. "I have seen too much to doubt. I once had the diagram before me—all but ther bearings. Then I saw ther hull thing blotted out by one sweep ov a lunatic's arm. It war provokin', Floss. I got nothin' by waitin' arter all; for a map rubbed out is nothin'."

The alcalde of Red Eye kept the girl company beside the wagon until far into the night. When she retired to sleep, he folded his arms and leaning against the wheel, became a wakeful guard.

Nobody came to disturb the vigils of the big alcalde, and more than once he turned his head and listened to the soft breathing of the friendless girl.

As the night deepened there fell over Red Eye the silence of the grave. Dropshot Bluff looked like a statue carved against the wagon as he watched and waited with his face turned toward

the mountain into whose depths the pards of the camp had gone to find Gilbert.

If an enemy had stolen into camp the keen ear of the alcalde would have heard his step; if a panther had glided down the street the eye of the giant guard would have noticed him.

"I'm guardin' something worth lookin' arter," muttered Dropshot Bluff. "Her hand kin fetch Gilbert around all right when ther boys find 'im. Ef I war mad, I b'lieve a pair ov eyes like hers could prove ther right medicine. I wonder whar Dagger Johnny is on ther trail ov Queen Moro? That Gentile spy thought she war playin' it when she confronted me with a recollection ov ther Mormon game. Vera knows it, too. Can those two women be connected? Vera killed Grim George ere she left, killed him an' left him with ther mark ov brotherhood defaced. I let her play sorceress too long. I gave Queen Moro ther grand bounce at once."

Within that same minute a sound reached the alcalde's ears and drove him forward. He drew his revolvers and scanned the street visible for a short distance in the starlight.

"It had a human sound!" he ejaculated. "It struck me like a death-rattle, but—"

"Am I in camp? Great God! is—this—Red Eye?"

Dropshot Bluff bounded forward. The heart of the big alcalde was in his throat and the strange cry and the ghostliness of the hour had sent a strange thrill throughout his frame.

Clutching his pistols, ready for any foe, he halted a short distance from the wagon and waited.

There was uppermost in his mind the belief that some person desperately hurt had come to Red Eye.

"Man, ghost er devil, which war it?" he at last asked himself in a whisper. "I'll solve ther mystery ef I hev ter rake ther camp."

Before him rose the outlines of his own cabin, and Dropshot Bluff moved toward it, to secure matches with which to prosecute his search.

"Who's opened my door?" he exclaimed at the threshold. "I shut it when I went ter guard Floss, but now—"

He paused abruptly, for at that moment his foot came in contact with some yielding object on the floor.

"It is hyer—a man!" cried the alcalde, stooping and feeling in the dark. "By Jove! somebody has come ter Red Eye. My hand is moist. Blood! by Jupiter!"

The next moment a match flashed up in the ruffian's cabin, and he bent over the man on the floor.

"Dagger Johnny!" fell from his lips. "My God! old pard, you found ther Gentile spy, eh?"

The big pard seemed dead as he lay before Dropshot Bluff, in the flickering light of his match. Blood covered the face, and his hands bore the same terrible stain.

Suddenly the hand of the alcalde descended upon Dagger Johnny's shoulder and shook him rudely.

"Dead er not?" cried Dropshot. "In ther name ov Heaven, who sent yer back ter Red Eye in this fix?"

The rough shaking seemed to bring the Red Eye pard out of a lethargy akin to death itself. When he saw the light and the face revealed by it, he uttered a loud cry.

"Ye'r with us yet, Johnny," said the alcalde. "Yer found ther Gentile spy?"

"I found 'er, an' I fetched it with me, cap'n. Open my bosom, an' clutch ther gold map. Thar's no discount on Dagger Johnny. I'm at ther end ov my trail, but Red Eye's just at the door ov hers!"

Dropshot Bluff's hands went straight at the pard's breast; they opened the shirt with mad eagerness. His fingers clutched a paper.

"Thet's it, cap'n. Gilbert drew ther diagram for her, but I got it," cried Dagger Johnny.

The alcalde uttered a shout of delight, but the next moment it was changed to one of despair.

"What's up, cap'n?" asked the man on the floor.

"I'm afraid ther map's ov no account; it is soaked with blood!"

Dagger Johnny groaned and shut his eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHASTA SLEUTH COMES BACK.

"TELL me about it. How did yer get it in yer hands? Couldn't ye hev fetched ther gold map back ter Red Eye in a better shape than this?"

Dropshot Bluff bent over Dagger Johnny while he spoke and held his hand on the man's shoulder.

"I follered her from camp; she took Gilbert away at ther revolver's muzzle. On ther way I war stopped by Vera ther Viper, but I broke away from her. It war a cute trail, cap'n, but I kept it. She told Gilbert when she took him away thet ther secret'd come back ter 'im in ther mountains, an' sure enough it did. He drew ther diagram for her, but when she thought she had it safe I pounced down on her like an eagle, an' we hed it nip an' tuck for ther map."

Dagger Johnny paused for breath, and the alcalde of Red Eye waited anxiously for the conclusion.

"Yes, you got ther diagram but what became ov her?" he asked. "Yer orders were—"

"Ter keep her this side o' Mormondom? yes, cap'n. Wal, I don't know what I did. I struck twice with ther best bowie in ther sierra then, with ther map, wounded myself, an' losin' blood at every step, I got away. It war a tussle, cap'n. Thet woman has ther strength ov a lioness an' ther fury ov one, too. It's all right now! You've got ther map an' I'm at ther end ov my trail. I'm gettin' thar with a flush thet'll do me no good. I'd like ter go ter sleep now."

"Never!" cried the alcalde trying to shake his companion out of the lethargy into which he was again passing. "If we can't make this map do, we'll get another. Wake up, hyer. Ther's better luck in store for yer, Johnny, than death."

The answer was an audible groan, and Johnny turned suddenly on his face.

For a moment Bluff gazed at him and then went to the table with the bloody map. The little lamp burning there showed him the priceless document in all its ghastliness, and when he discovered that the folds were pasted together with blood he glanced at the stalwart figure lying at his feet and let slip a curse.

Suddenly, throwing the map upon the table, he turned and stooped over the wounded rough.

"He shall tell me whar it happened. I'll take ther trail myself. Ther diagram that I'll clutch will not be blood-pasted! Gilbert in Queen Moro's hands, eh? He shall be in mine inside ov twenty-four hours! See hyer, Johnny. Wake up once more afore ye cash yer chips at death's counter. Whar did it all happen?"

This time he shook the wounded pard in vain. Dagger Johnny was not dead, for his heart was still at work as the alcalde could tell by listening, but he had fallen into a terrible sleep bordering on the everlasting one.

"Hang it! This is provokin'!" suddenly exclaimed the ruffian. "I'll find it, anyhow. Let him die thar!"

He sprang up and dashed from the cabin.

"I'll leave Red Eye ter his care," he went on, as he hurried toward the wagon where he had left Floss quietly sleeping. "Ther boys will plant 'im ef they come back afore I do. Gilbert gave ther Gentile spy ther map he rubbed out for me! I'll put my fingers at his throat for that! I'll forever divorce him an' ther beauty ov ther wagon, an' then, ter cap ther climax, I'll make her queen ov a Red Eye that'll discount this mountain den."

At the wagon he halted, and cautiously lifted the curtain.

Floss still slept, and the first intimation she had of Dropshot's presence, was his hand at her wrist.

"We don't wait any longer for Gilbert," he said. "We'll go an' find him."

The girl's reply was an eager ejaculation, and in less than a minute, she was on the ground beside the big alcalde.

"Can you find him?" she asked.

"If I can't, nobody can!" was the reply, as the alcalde smiled. "I'll beat ther whole camp thet's now on hunt ov him. Ar' yer ready ter trust Dropshot Bluff?"

"I am ready to find Gilbert. I must call you friend," said the girl. "I am friendless in this unknown region."

A singular gleam of triumph filled the outlaw's eyes, as he turned away to conceal his looks.

"Bet yer life, I'm yer friend, my Californy pink!" he said, under his breath. "When you find Gilbert, he'll be under my thumb, an' we'll be nearer ther lost bonanza than we ar' now."

Floss permitted herself to be led away by the alcalde, and the twain passed down the deserted and silent street.

At the half-open door of his own shanty, Dropshot left her, and stepped inside.

"I'll leave a message for ther boys, in case they should come back afore I do," he muttered.

The little lamp still burned on the table, and in its weird light, lay the man whose terrible return to Red Eye, had filled the alcalde with momentary horror.

With but a glance at Dagger Johnny, Dropshot seated himself at the table, and wrote in his bold hand, on a bit of paper, the following message:

"TO RED EYE:—Floss an' I hev taken up Gilbert's trail, from news fetched back by Dagger Johnny, who war killed by the woman, Queen Moro. If you get hyer before I do, keep Red Eye till I come. I feel ther lost Ophir at my fingers' ends. We ar' mighty nigh ther big layout thet we've been starvin' for. If Vera ther Viper should come back hyer—but she won't!"

DROPSHOT BLUFF.

This message he placed under the lamp in a manner that it would be easily seen, and then paid his attention to Dagger Johnny.

"I said in ther message thet he war dead, but he isn't," he observed with a smile. "Wal, he will be when ther boys come back. Good-by, Johnny! Next ter Grim George, you war Dropshot's best pard."

The alcalde of Red Eye let fall the hand he had lifted and went out, closing the door after him.

"Now for Gilbert!" he said to the girl who waited for him in the starlight. "When we see

Red Eye ag'in', Floss, you'll be ther happiest mortal in Californy!"

"That will repay me for the past!" exclaimed the young girl. "I will endure any thing to find the lost man."

If Dropshot had gone back to the cabin even then he would have seen Dagger Johnny come back to life, as it were.

As if the lethargy had been broken by some strange influence, the Red Eye pard rose to a sitting posture and looked around.

"Desarted!" he cried. "When a man gets near ther great divide they turn ther backs on him, don't they? If thar war a chance for me—one chance in a thousand, I'd make things hum. Whar's ther map I fetched back ter Red Eye? Did he throw it away because it war soaked in my blood? By heavens! Dagger Johnny, arter all, follerin' ther Gentile spy war a mighty poor game!"

After awhile the man dragged himself to the table and reached the stool left there by Dropshot Bluff.

He looked like a person on the verge of death; his eyes had a strange inhuman gleam.

"What is this?" he suddenly exclaimed and his crimson fingers clutched the message held down by the lamp. "Mebbe it war left for me!"

He drew the message to him and read it.

"Jehosaphat! Gone off with ther girl an' left me for dead, alone in Red Eye?" fell from Dagger Johnny's lips. "Thet's what a man gets for comin' back, cut ter pieces in his sarvice. This is my pay for staggerin' down ther mountain trail with ther gold map in my bosom! He wouldn't stop ter doctor me? No! Mebbe, Dropshot, mebbe you'll find Dagger Johnny ther liveliest corpse thet ever dropped in Red Eye."

Twice he read the message before he cast it aside, and each time his eyes seemed to emit flashes of rage.

"I'm in poor condition to play any kind ov a game just now," he said. "I feel Queen Moro's knife in me yet, as it war. Wouldn't I give much ter know thet one ov my strokes put her out o' the way? No! I wouldn't. Ef she is really ther spy ov ther Gentile League I want her to send yer back ter Utah, Dropshot. You've desarted Dagger Johnny at death's door. May ther noose o' the old league find yer yaller throat fer yer cowardice!"

The door opened with a slight noise, and the ruffian started.

"Hades an' horns!—you?" he cried, and the next moment his hand fell upon the message he had just cast aside.

A tall and handsome man came in, with his eyes fixed on Dagger Johnny, and halting at the table he put out one hand till it grasped the mountain tough's wrist.

"Ar' you ther only man in Red Eye?" he asked. "Whar ar' all the rest—Dropshot Bluff an' ther girl who came in the wagon?"

"Let me get my breath first," said the astonished rough. "You're the last man I expected ter see hyer."

"Perhaps. I think I look inter ther face ov ther man who dropped me in Gilbert's cabin when I stood at ther boy's table. I am quite sure ov it now. You are Dagger Johnny, an' you look as if you've been chawed by a grizzly."

"Er passed through a quartz mill, eh?" essayed Dagger Johnny, with a grim attempt at a smile. "I guess I kin say, Keen Kennard, that I'm ther man what shot yer in Gilbert's shanty. I'm at yer mercy."

For a moment the Shadow from Shasta looked down into Dagger Johnny's face, and then released his wrist. He seemed to have seen in that brief time that the Red Eye pard was on the borders of the other world.

"You knew me the moment I came to Red Eye?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My mask ov Magic Merle did not deceive you?"

"All ther masks you could hev worn wouldn't hev done it. I told Dropshot ther moment I got a good look at yer thet you war ther famous sleuth-hound ov the North. I war once a Shastan myself. I saw yer daily fer five years. Aha! when you fool this mountain chick, Kennard, you'll hoodwink ther Almighty. I'm alone, an' consequently at yer mercy."

"I will be merciful," said the detective. "I never hasten a dyin' man's lest minute. Who cut yer?"

"Queen Moro."

"What?"

Keen Kennard seemed about to spring across the table.

"Queen Moro. D'yer know a pantheress by that name?"

"Heavens, yes!—the woman who sent me upon this hunt. Was she masked?"

"Yes."

"The same!" cried Kennard. "Couldn't she wait for my report? Whar is she?"

"Mebbe dead whar I left her," answered Johnny, with ferocity. "I struck out ter kill. We had a fight for a bit ov paper thet may be lyin' somewhar about saturated with my blood. It war ther diagram ov ther lost Ophir."

Kennard uttered a cry of surprise.

"Dropshot said it war no account when he saw it," continued the tough; "he may hev tossed it aside."

"In this shanty?"

"In this shanty."

"Pardon me," said the Shadow, catching up the lamp. "I had that diagram fixed in my mind a short time ago, but your bullet lost it all to me. I could choke you for that shot, Johnny, but I won't hasten your time."

The Red Eye rough saw the Shasta sleuth move about the little room with the lamp in search of the paper whose secret was yet to cost more than one life.

He sat at the table breathing hard and followed him in his search.

All at once Keen Kennard pounced upon an object in one corner, and then came back to the table with triumph in his eyes.

"Is this it?" he asked, displaying his "find," to the dilated eyes of the alcalde's pard.

"That's ther dockermint thet's cost this individual his life blood," assured Johnny, eying the little piece of folded and blood-dyed paper in the detective's hand. "It's ov no account, though, don't yer see?"

Kennard made no reply but began to undo the matted folds, watched with intense interest by the man on the stool.

Several minutes passed in watch and work when, all at once, Dagger Johnny fell forward on the table.

"Death got there at last!" remarked the Shadow from Shasta, looking up from his work. "I will accomplish my task if my patience holds out. There are lines on this paper. They make up the map I once had in my head. I am going to keep my oath to Queen Moro if the trail to the lost Ophir is crimson like this gold map!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLOOD MAP'S FORTUNES.

ON the face of the man who walked from Dropshot Bluff's cabin when the morning stars were beginning to pale, there was a firm, set-determination, and with steady step he walked toward the mountain.

Behind him, dead, perhaps, on the little table, lay Dagger Johnny. The weird light of the lamp fell athwart his Herculean figure; he stirred not as the morning advanced, and the last stars crept down the trails of the sky.

Keen Kennard never looked behind him. In his bosom was the paper stained with the blood of the man he was leaving for dead: he had examined it far enough to notice that it contained many suggestive lines, and Dagger Johnny had told him that it was the diagram of the lost mine, drawn by the hand of Gilbert.

But what puzzled the Shastan most was the presence of Queen Moro in that country.

By the merest chance, as we know, he had missed her in Red Eye, and the announcement of her presence there had struck him with a shock.

Tired of waiting for his report, the masked woman of Sacramento had taken up the hunt herself. Perhaps she believed that he had fallen by the hand of some guardian of the golden treasure, or rather she might believe that, despite his oath, he had played her false.

Keen Kennard found just beyond the camp the horse on which, as Magic Merle, he had ridden among Dropshot Bluff and pards. He walked straight to the animal and threw himself into the saddle.

Sullenly he rode away, and the morning when it came found him deep among the sierras studying in the light the crimsoned paper found in the cabin.

The horse picked his way over a narrow trail hemmed in by lofty walls, covered in many places with large-leaved mountain creepers. He did not seem to glance ahead, but was absorbed in the mystery clutched by his hands.

"The more I examine this map, the surer I am that I have grasped the key to Gilbert's well-kept secret," he murmured. "The lines recall the map he drew for me on the table. Here are the bearings at the top, where the blood-stains are not so deep. By and by I will have it all at my fingers' ends! So much for going back to Red Eye at a venture."

During a part of this time a number of men were regarding Keen Kennard from the mountain-slope above. They were nine in number, and were some of those started out upon Gilbert's trail by the alcalde.

"That's no fool paper, boys," said one of the gang, covering the detective with his finger. "Magic Merle didn't come hyer for nothin'. We hev'n't found Gilbert, but we needn't go back ter Red Eye empty-handed. We kin first make that man stand an' deliver, and then we kin turn 'im over ter Dropshot, paper an' all."

"Not yet, Duncan; let's foller him awhile. Suthin' important may develop itself," was the answer. "By haltin' him whar he is, we may spoil a game too soon. Dagger Johnny called that man Keen Kennard."

"But took it back with a six-shooter at his head!" laughed Duncan. "It war a forced retraction, an' I'm willin' ter stake my share in ther Ophir that Johnny knew what he war sayin'. Halt 'im now, I say."

But Duncan found himself overruled by his

pards, and Keen Kennard was permitted to ride along, with the armed toughs of Red Eye watching him like a set of mountain hawks.

"Jupiter! suthin' is goin' ter happen!" suddenly ejaculated Duncan. "Look at that person waitin' in ther trail yonder for ther Shasta sport."

The eight men looked over Duncan's outstretched arm, and exclaimed at once:

"Vera, ther Viper!"

All eyes were now fixed on the sorceress of Red Eye, who had ridden into the narrow trail with her black eyes fixed on the detective, who, as he rode slowly along, saw but the bloody diagram in his hands.

"That's the woman that killed Grim George!" grated Duncan. "She stands outlawed by ther laws ov Red Eye, an' kin be shot on sight. She an' that Shastan ar' pards. It's all plain ter me now. She is waitin' for him ter come up."

"Pards or not, they're goin' ter meet within two minutes. Down! neither must see us now."

The nine men dropped, but their eyes did not lose sight of the two parties about to meet in the trail below.

The mountain sorceress and her steed looked like a well molded statue; in the early light she had not seen the mountain pards. Keen Kennard was the sole object she saw.

If the pards had been near enough they would have seen the dark eyes of Vera glitter strangely while she watched the man from Shasta.

Nearer and nearer came the two together.

Suddenly the sorceress seemed to speak, for the detective's horse stood still and the man himself looked up.

"Pards? no pards thar!" exclaimed one of the secreted nine. "By Jupiter! I'd like ter hear what passes between them."

The sight of the handsome woman in front of him startled the gold detective. He clutched the paper he had been studying, and recoiled in his saddle.

"I am Vera," said the woman in reply to his look. "You are Keen Kennard, from Shasta."

"You must be a witch, besides," was the answer.

"I have played sorceress, which is akin to witch-craft, you know. I see you have got out of Red Eye with a whole skin, which is more than I expected. Are all your letters red ones like that?" and Vera looked at the map visible in the detective's clutches.

"Never mind about my letters," said Kennard.

"Nor about the gold map, ha, ha!" laughed the woman. "Go back to Shasta, Keen Kennard. The key to the new Ophir will never turn in your hands. Go back."

"I took the advice of a woman once and it cost me thousands. We will wait till the play is out before we express opinions. From playing sorceress in Red Eye you have taken to sounding warnings among the mountains, eh?"

"I am liable to do more than warn."

"You, Vera the sorceress?"

"What if I have sworn that the Ophir shall never be opened to man?"

"Then you are liable to see one oath broken," smiled Kennard. "Since you know me and hint at my mission to the sierras, tell me where I am likely to find the woman who came here a few hours ago."

"Queen Moro! In heaven's name who is she?"

The detective shook his head.

"You know as much about her as I do," he said.

"Perhaps I know more. I have looked under her mask."

"No!"

"I fought for the right, and when I won I made a terrible enemy. Now I'd give my right arm, almost, if I had never seen her face. I see it when awake, and when I close my eyes it dances before me in all its hideousness."

"What is it like?" cried the detective, leaning forward. "She has the form of a Cleopatra and a voice full of melody—but her face! I have yearned to lift that mask myself. Once, in Sacramento, I could hardly keep my hands off."

"Don't ask me to tell you what Queen Moro is like," said Vera, a perceptible shudder following the sentence. "Had I that face, as I told her, with her vow to kill me ringing in my ears, I'd hide it from the world by death in some undiscovered spot."

"Then she must be terribly marred for life."

"Horribly marred. Let me forget it. Beautiful she must have been before that, and demons were the person or persons who sent her out into the world thus disfigured."

"Keep the secret," cried the detective. "The time will come when I will lift that black mask and see for myself."

"She will be dead when you do!"

"Dead or alive, I will see that face! She sent me to the sierras. She derided my manhood and scoffed at my bravery until I would have taken an oath to penetrate the infernal regions!"

"Ah, she swore you to the task of finding the lost mine."

"That is it."

"Well, she is trailing the secret herself."

"With Gilbert?"

"With the famous lost man of Gold Gorge."

That paper in your hand, Keen Kennard, must be the diagram the young man drew for her, the one that she had to fight for with Dagger Johnny of Red Eye Bar."

"Sorceress you are, by heavens!" ejaculated the Shasta Sleuth.

"Oh, no. I never league with spirits. I have hoodwinked the toughs of Red Eye by arts that to them appeared mystic, but I'm no witch, Kennard. I only saw the last of the fight. I saw the man who went back over the trail, now on his feet, now on all fours, leaving behind him a trail as red as your precious gold map. That man was Dagger Johnny. If I had thought that he carried the map I might have stopped him. He did have it, I see. He took it—to you, but not intentionally, eh?"

"It fell into my hands anyhow. But, Queen Moro? How did she fare in the fight?"

"She was left lying on the trail so long that I wondered why the one spellbound spectator did not go and lift her mask. Gilbert saw the fight, but, like a man in a trance, he did not seem to realize it."

"Heavens! Is the boy mad again?" cried Kennard.

"I cannot say. If he is not, he will draw another diagram for the huntress who had come from Sacramento."

"He shall not!" exclaimed the detective.

"That is what I say, too. Or, if he does, it shall avail her nothing. Remember, Keen Kennard, that the Ophir shall never be opened."

"What is it to you?"

"Not much, perhaps," said Vera with a smile.

"But I have said under the stars and with uplifted hand, that two events should never occur while I live—the finding of the lost bonanza and the natural death of the men who committed the atrocious crime of the tenth of July, 1867."

"You are avenger as well as sorceress," exclaimed the man from Shasta.

"No sorceress," smiled the woman. "Keen Kennard, there will soon be hunters at your heels. The pards of Red Eye, whose whole existence is a hunt for the closed gates of gold, will follow the man who clutches the map drawn by Gilbert. I told Dropshot Bluff once that Magic Merle was Keen Kennard, but he hardly believed me. I did it because I saw in you a man who, to my knowledge, never turned back from a trail until he stood at the end of it. I have watched Gilbert through his long days of insanity, and his short intervals of right-mindedness. I have heard secrets from his lips which no other being has heard. I would wager my life against the turn of a dollar thrown into the air, Kennard of Shasta, that I could ride to the very door of Ophir."

The detective checked a start, and gazed coolly into the woman's face.

"Come with me and I will show you something," continued Vera, quickly. "The morning is a good one for observation, and you have the eye of an eagle."

The sorceress of Red Eye wheeled and looked at the gold-detective, who came alongside.

"We're not going to the portals of Ophir!" she laughed. "I am only going to show you the rich region. While I was playing sorceress at Red Eye, I might have been money queen of the Coast."

The trail led gradually up the mountain after quitting the scene of the singular encounter, and the twain rode side by side, watched by the nine bronze hawks of Red Eye, who had waited impatiently for the interview to come to a close.

They wound among the trees in single file till they resembled a huge serpent creeping through the dawn.

At last Vera and Keen Kennard were forced to dismount and lead their steeds, one after the other, toward the lofty summit of the peak.

"We are here," said the woman, turning upon the Shasta detective on the bare, flat rock that crowned the summit. "Look afar yonder, Keen Kennard, where those three blue peaks seem to touch, though they are far apart. They are miles away, and between them and us lies the trail that leads to Ophir. Yonder, in the shadow of those mountains, lies the mine that has cost more than one man his life, and which is yet to cost blood. Mark well the peaks. I see your eyes glitter, Keen Kennard; but, my brave man, you shall never traverse the death land that lies between us and the lost mine!"

"Who'll prevent?" flashed the Shastan, turning upon the speaker. "Red Eye, think you?"

"More than Red Eye!" was the answer calmly spoken. "My advice to you is to go back to Shasta. There are other trails for you. Red Eye will follow you, the big alcalde may get between you and Ophir, but Vera the Viper will also stand in your way!"

"Try it!" exclaimed Keen Kennard, seizing the woman's arm and glaring at her with the rage of a tiger. "I have reached that point when nothing human keeps me back."

The sorceress looked into his face and laughed. "Since you have seen the ground of what use is your crimson map? Here, let me destroy it—thus!"

Keen Kennard jerked back, but too late. The map was snatched from his hand, and while Vera laughed derisively, the red fragments fell at his feet!

CHAPTER XV.
VERA IN A TRAP.

THE night that followed the scene on the mountain top found Red Eye Bar inhabited once more.

Dropshot and Floss had come back; they had failed to find Gilbert, and the alcalde had returned to meet the men he had started out upon the youth's track. While the girl's anxiety had not abated in the least, the hunt had discouraged her, and in the solitude of the little cabin which had been taken instead of the wagon, she wondered if her mission amid the sierras would ever amount to anything.

The alcalde expected to find a dead man in his cabin when he opened the door. He had left Dagger Johnny on the floor unconscious and, as he believed, very near his end. His first glance therefore was at the floor when he crossed the threshold.

"Hello! whar's Johnny?" exclaimed the alcalde disappointed at finding himself the sole occupant of the shanty. "I expected to find a corpse hyer, but thar's none whar I left a dyin' man."

The puzzled alcalde at once instituted a search that proved barren of satisfactory results. The longer he looked the deeper grew the mystery of Dagger Johnny.

If the man had recovered—which was not at all likely—where was he to be found?

Bluff went out and consulted the weary pards who had come back without finding Gilbert's trail. The camp was searched, cabin by cabin, and then the trails to the mountains.

"Let ther galoot go!" exclaimed the alcalde at last. "He's crept off somewhar ter die like a wounded wolf in secret. Thar war grit in Dagger Johnny, but Red Eye still has a good supply ov ther article."

The hunters who had come back were not the men who had witnessed the meeting of Vera and the Shadow from Shasta. They had not returned and their prolonged absence indicated that they had found a clew somewhere among the mountains.

There was nothing to tell Dropshot Bluff that Keen Kennard had visited the camp; the gold-detective had left no trail, but Dagger Johnny could furnish a startling revelation, if found.

The alcalde sat in his cabin, waiting for the absent pards. They were liable to return at any time, and if they did not bring Gilbert, they would at least have news of him.

"After all, ther's no gettin' at ther lost Ophir without the boy's help," said he aloud. "He must furnish us with ther clew. With him dead an' ther secret lost, we might as well abandon Red Eye and go back ter our old life."

One hour later a footstep came to the alcalde's door, and as he sprung up to greet his visitor the portal opened revealing the figure of a stalwart man.

"Is it you, Duncan?" cried the boss of Red Eye. "I've been waitin' for your report. You hev news! You hev found Gilbert?"

"Not Gilbert but some one else," was the answer as Duncan smiled.

"Queen Moro?"

"No."

"Ther sorceress then?"

"Yes."

"Great Heaven! where is ther viper that killed Grim George?" cried Dropshot Bluff, dashing madly toward the door until suddenly checked by Duncan who clutched his arm. "I owe you a thousand for findin' that woman. By Jove! it does me as much good for the present as if you had found Gilbert."

"Not so fast, cap'n," said Duncan, coolly. "We found her by accident. We saw her meet Keen Kennard—"

"No! Dagger Johnny shot that man in Gilbert's presence!" interrupted the alcalde.

"If he did it war no dead drop. Anyhow we saw Vera an' thet Shasta sleuth-hound meet. We didn't get him, cap'n, but we did ther next best thing—entrapped ther sorceress ov Red Eye."

"Good! Duncan. Show me ther tigress will yer an' let me avenge ther blood ov Grim. Sorceress she is, but sorcery can't save her in this camp. Come!"

Duncan dropped the alcalde's arm and looked him in the eye.

"I'd advise yer ter go slow about this avengin' business," he said. "In ther first place, Vera may hev friends in Red Eye, an' secondly we want ter know why she took Kennard ter ther mountain top an' showed him some kentry far below."

"Did she do thet?"

"Yes. We warn't near enough ter catch 'er words, but I've got an opinion, cap'n."

"Wal?"

"She war showin' him ther land ov ther lost mine."

A strange cry broke over the alcalde's lips.

"That woman know whar it is? I don't b'lieve it!" he exclaimed. "She never left Red Eye long enough ter hev found it. But if she knows, Duncan—by heaven! if Vera ther Viper shares Gilbert's secret, we'll hev a grip on it afore mornin'!"

Meanwhile, in a cabin illumined by a single lamp, sat the woman who had been brought

back to Red Eye by the nine men mentioned in the foregoing chapter.

She was not the sole occupant of the place, but she took no notice of the men who watched her, as though she were a wild beast maneuvering for a leap.

Stalwart and bronzed they were, fully armed and merciless in countenance, the men who had outwitted her in the mountains, and brought her back a captive to Red Eye Bar.

She knew that Duncan had gone to inform Dropshot Bluff, Grim George's pard, of her return; but the knowledge did not seem to disturb her.

Vera the sorceress waited coolly for the man who might open the door, and shoot her dead at the table without a word.

Suddenly there was a slight commotion among the men nearest the door, and the next moment it swung open and Dropshot Bluff came in.

The moment he saw the woman in the lamp-light his eyes flashed. He took one great mad stride toward her, and laughed in her face.

"So ther boys found yer an' brought yer back inter ther web of death?" he cried. "Don't yer know, woman, thet this is a bad place for Vera ther Viper? Ther blood ov Grim George has hardly dried. Caught with ther Shasta Sleuth on Mount Mercedes, eh?"

The men leaned forward. What would the sorceress say?

"Caught when I should have been on my guard," she answered, showing no fear, but giving the assembled pards a bitter look. "But never mind that, Dropshot Bluff. I am back in Red Eye."

"For the last time, unless certain questions ar' truthfully answered," said the alcalde, glancing at Duncan, who had entered with him. "In ther first place, Vera, what war it yer pointed out ter Keen Kennard from ther mountain-top?"

Instantly the eyes of the woman seemed to dance.

"Ha, ha! more than you will ever reach!" she laughed.

"War it Ophir?" cried the alcalde. "Did yer get Gilbert's secret while yer played sorceress in Red Eye?"

There was no answer; the woman rose and stood against the wall, facing the sierra pards with undaunted mien.

"I have not played sorceress for nothing, Dropshot Bluff. The dead man knew that before he died. I showed Keen Kennard a region beyond whose portals no man concerned in this gold drama shall ever get alive."

"Which means, pards ov Red Eye, that she knows Gilbert's secret," said the alcalde, throwing a look at the breathless men behind him. "She admits ther murder ov Grim George."

"I slew him," said Vera calmly. "An' no person had a better right to take the ex-Mormon spider's life. If his pard hed crossed my path when he did, Grim George might be alive to-night. I killed the first of the two who encountered me. I was leaving Red Eye in peace, but a sight of that man, the touch of his hand brought back those awful July days."

"Heavens! who are you?" cried the alcalde, and then he looked at the puzzled crowd. "I want ter say hyer, men," he went on, "thet whatever sho insinuates about ther past will be a base lie! I came out ov Utah with clean hands, though I've been no seraph in some things."

"All devil and no angel!" laughed Vera. "Dropshot Bluff came up out of Mormondom with the reddest hands a man ever owned. Why should I keep back the secret longer? I can make these men loathe you, alcalde of Red Eye. You may proclaim my words falsehoods before they have been spoken, but I can prove them to the satisfaction of the men behind you. The man I killed was your pard, then, he has been your slave since. When on that summer day in the midst of Mormondom—"

Dropshot Bluff threw up his hand in a gesture of remonstrance and then leaped across the table with a roar of rage resembling the hoarse cry of a chained tiger.

The men of Red Eye recoiled thunderstruck by the swift spring, and the hand of Dropshot Bluff was at Vera's throat before she could add another word to the broken sentence.

Duncan was the first to recover.

"Give ther woman a chance," he said as he went forward and seized the man-tiger of Red Eye. "It's onfair ter choke her in this manner."

"Ar' you one ov her friends?" cried the alcalde, facing the Red Eye pard. "By ther holy stars! I trust Duncan no more after ter-night. This woman—this mountain viper, sorceress an' witch, killed Grim George. When I am not master ov Red Eye you kin interfere. Shall we let her sting ther hull camp one by one? Ef she hated one enough ter take his life she hates us all! Ef yer didn't want 'er punished why fetch her back? I am still master hyer."

Duncan had no supporters in the crowd; the feelings of the brawny pards of Red Eye were against the mountain sorceress.

Several men threw themselves between Duncan and the alcalde, and the former, biting his lips, was forced toward the door.

"Ther region you showed Kennard from the

mountain top, we will find or die!" said Dropshot Bluff, glaring into Vera's face. "We will never ask you ag'in for Gilbert's secret. You will no more accuse ther alcalde ov Red Eye ov a false crime. Vera ther Viper, you ar' goin' ter die on ther grave of Grim George. How appropriate! Your blood shall stain ther earth we've heaped over yer last victim!"

The only reply was a defiant glare, and the hand of Dropshot Bluff dropped from Vera's throat, and left her erect against the wall gasping for breath.

"Do your worst!" she said a moment later. "I have been a fool for sparing when I could have struck a hundred times. Men of Red Eye, the fiend who calls himself Dropshot Bluff is the infamous wretch—"

"Silence!" roared the red-faced alcalde. "Ter ther grave of Grim George with that woman! Ther lie she has coined I will not hear! Take charge ov her, gents. Red Eye vengeance shall be both swift an' terrible. Do yer duty! By ther eternal heavens! ther man that flinches I'll drop in his tracks dead as ther witch's victim."

Two of the most stalwart spectators sprung forward and seized the woman who did not resist.

"Away with her!" shouted the mad alcalde. "You'll find me at ther grave ov Grim George when you halt thar with thet serpent. Ef she opens her mouth ter accuse me, choke 'er, an' take her on insensible."

With the last word still shaking his lips, the boss of Red Eye Bar left the cabin, and Vera was dragged across the threshold and out into the night.

The grave of Grim George lay just beyond the precincts of the mountain camp, and without mercy, the bronzed pards started off with their captive.

She did not speak until the last cabin had been left behind.

"So I am to be choked if I accuse your red alcalde?" she suddenly said.

"You'd better not," was the quick response.

"We know nothin' but ter obey ther man we sarve. Ther pards ov Red Eye ar' a sworn organization. We ar' tigers without mercy when it comes ter carryin' out ther cap'n's orders."

Vera leaned forward and looked into the speaker's face.

"Tigers even shun their mates sometimes," she said. "Poor fools! the Ophir is lost to you forever, and the man you serve who reddened his hands—"

"Thar!" and a hand landed at Vera's throat. "Shall I carry out my orders, woman, or will yer stop whar ye ar'?"

"I'll go silent to the end," gasped Vera and the hand fell back.

At that moment Dropshot Bluff emerged from his cabin to stop with a cry of amazement and then to start back.

"What fetched you back?" he exclaimed glaring at the being that confronted him. "I'm just goin' ter rid Red Eye ov one witch. Shall I make it a double death?"

"Not to-night, Dropshot Bluff," was the answer. "If you lift your hand against Vera the Viper, morning will stare at the alcalde's corpse."

The boss of Red Eye attempted to laugh.

"Come an' see my vengeance ef yer dare!" he cried. "But I promise yer now, Queen Moro, thet when it is finished we'll look under yer black mask an' take in yer hidden beauty. I don't know what brought yer back ter Red Eye at this time. I don't keer; but ther man what runs this camp is Dropshot Bluff!"

He turned and with a glance at the masked woman walked rapidly away.

"I am on hand," she said. "I never leave a game till it has been played through. I am not afraid that your vengeance is going to take that viper's life. It belongs to me! Walk faster, Dropshot Bluff. I am anxious to reach the grave of the man who played with you the red game in Mormondom."

Dropshot Bluff looked down; the Sacramento mystery was at his side.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CLUTCHES OF MADNESS.

"JEHOSAPHAT! what's that? I never heard ov a singin'-school in these parts afore. Listen! Thet's a wild tune an' I'll bet my life it comes from ther throat ov a crazy man!"

The man who spoke these words stood in a narrow mountain pass several miles from Red Eye, and at the same moment that witnessed the meeting between Queen Moro and Dropshot Bluff in the gold-hunters' camp.

If he had been asked how he came there he could have given no satisfactory reply, and when the reader is informed that he was Dagger Johnny, he will manifest some surprise.

Life still clung to the heart-strings of the desperado who had ventured to snatch from Queen Moro's hands the map drawn by Gilbert for her in the mountains; he had fought for it with the desperation of men of his class and in the end, as we have seen, had carried it back to Red Eye matted together by his blood.

Left for dead in the alcalde's cabin by Keen Kennard, Dagger Johnny had recovered in a wild delirium strength enough to quit the camp.

Seized with a frenzied desire to follow Dropshot Bluff, who had left him unconscious on the cabin floor, he had staggered deeper and deeper into the mysterious hills, following no particular trail, but animated by a fierce desire to meet the man who had deserted him when he needed help.

This is why Dagger Johnny could not have told how he had reached the spot where he heard the queer song that went reverberating from mountain to mountain, now low and plaintive, now fierce and high.

He had traveled almost the entire distance out of his mind; an unnatural strength had kept him on his feet.

He had listened amazed for several minutes. It was a wild song, and suggested a wild singer.

"Mebbe it's Gilbert," said the Red Eye pard, suddenly to himself. "What ef I could catch ther boy hyer. He never stirred while Queen Moro an' I fought fer ther map? He may hev broken away from ther masked witch. It doesn't sound much like his voice, but it may be ther mad part o' him singin'."

Eager to see the singer who seemed to be separated from him only by a few yards of mountain earth, Dagger Johnny moved slowly on again.

He was seen by the brilliant stars that glittered high above the mountain peak, and he crept on like a wounded panther going back to make one more fight.

Now and then the senseless song would grow quiet, only to burst out afresh with more spirit.

"Ef I war a b'liever in spooks," laughed Dagger Johnny, "I'd probably be movin' the other way at this moment. Ghosts never sing like that. Hit's a kind ov a won't-go-home-till-mornin' air. I'll see ther galoot presently."

All the time surely, but slowly, the Red Eye pard was moving down upon the singer, he knew that but a few feet separated them, and he was anxious to get at the bottom of the mystery.

"By Jove! it's movin' this way," he said, halting to hug the wall of pine at his right. "I own thet a queerish feelin' keeps along my bones, but thet's because I'm not as good as I war afore I hed ther tussle with ther masked woman. I'm Dagger Johnny yet, though; bet yer boots I'm a lily ov ther mountains, an' p'isen ter ther small flowers."

Almost suddenly the maker of the song came in sight, and at the second look Dagger Johnny could hardly suppress a cry.

Not twenty feet away Gilbert Golden stood erect in the middle of the trail without hat and jacket, and from his lips fell the wild strains to which the mountain sport had listened.

"He got away from ther witch, didn't he?" ejaculated Johnny. "An' ther boy is out ov his head a'gin. I wonder ef ther diagram is in his mind now. When he war off at Gold Gorge he war always makin' up scraps about it, but we never got ther papers put tergether correctly. Kin I do anything with 'im now? I've got ter play fox er I'll frighten ther young chap away."

Not for a moment did the man from Red Eye take his eyes from the mad youth who stood before him. Gilbert's face was turned toward Red Eye as if he was going back to the men who would give their right arms for his secret.

"Mebbe I'm too badly wounded ter find ther bonanza ef I hed ther map," said Dagger Johnny, while he watched Gilbert. "But I'd try. By ther eternal heavens! I'd foller ther trail ef I hed ter crawl it. It'd be paradise ter die at ther door ov thet lost Ophir. This mountain pauper 'd experience a thrill ov pleasure in dyin' richer than ther Rothschilds pards over ther pond."

Gilbert's song broke suddenly, and the youth ended with a laugh that left no doubt of his disordered mind.

"Ef I could put a pencil an' some paper in his hand now I think I'd hev ther secret," muttered Dagger Johnny. "I'm not able ter foller him back ter Red Eye. Ef I hed Gilbert by ther arm, an' Queen Moro—ef livin'—by ther throat, Jehu! what work thar'd be hyer!"

Dagger Johnny might have pursued his remarks if another figure had not crossed his line of vision.

"Not while I'm hyer!" grated the Red Eye pard. "I keer not who comes, nor how badly I'm hurt; I stand between Gilbert an' all Ophir hunters."

Dagger Johnny stepped forward; the youth heard him and turned.

"Halt! Throw up your hands or I'll paint the ground with your brains!"

The Red Eye pard stood still and saw the stalwart man he had sighted not ten feet away with two revolvers leveled at his head.

Gilbert Golden turned and faced the two like a man just awakening from a trance. A wild stare was in his eyes.

"Yer wouldn't shoot a man what kin almost literally carry his heart on his sleeve, would yer?" queried Dagger Johnny, in a manner comic enough to provoke a smile.

"Dagger Johnny!" was the responsive exclamation as the speaker stepped nearer. "I left you for dead in the alcalde's shanty, but here you are."

"I got a new lease of life. My checks ar' on ther counter, but death hadn't time to cash 'em. You wouldn't drop me, Keen Kennard?"

"That depends. You were on this boy's trail?"

"Not much. I'm in no condition ter trail any one. I heard his wild songs. He's off again, Kennard."

"Poor boy!" ejaculated the man from Shasta.

"I'll take charge of him, Johnny."

"With ther intention ov gettin' ther gold secret from him, eh? We're all arter that, Kennard. It gave me these slashes that hev let out more blood than I'll ever see ag'in. Look hyer! thet shirt is pasted ter Dagger Johnny's bosom by some ov ther best blood that ever gushed in ther sierras!"

The hand of Keen Kennard had fallen upon the arm of the youth of Gold Gorge, and he turned and laughed half mercilessly in Dagger Johnny's face.

"I didn't shed it!" he said. "This boy didn't draw one drop of it, so throw no accusations at us. I'm no surgeon, Dagger Johnny. Go back to Red Eye to live or die."

"Never, by Jupiter!"

"Then stay here. Come, Gilbert, the hand of a friend is in yours, and woe to the man or woman who attempts to separate us."

For a moment the young man seemed inclined to resist the detective's persuasive movement, but a glance from Keen Kennard's eyes seemed to decide him, and the next moment the pair walked away.

"Thet's ther coolest piece of business I ever saw," said Dagger Johnny. "It 'd keep without ice allsummer. I kin stay hyer an' pass up ther chips, eh, Keen Kennard? May I be roasted in Tartarus ef I die whar I am—ef I die at all just for accommodation!"

A pair of tigerish eyes glared at the detective and the youth whom he now led unresistingly away.

If Dagger Johnny had possessed a six-shooter it is probable that the Shasta Sleuth would have been halted by a bullet in the back, and only because the Red Eye pard had no weapon, was he allowed to proceed.

Gilbert went along without a word, and as docile as a lamb. Not a word passed between the pair, but Kennard looked often at his companion, and his eyes dilated with wonderment and mute questionings.

"If the wounded wolf behind follows he may not get a chance to die in Red Eye," said Kennard to himself. "I have looked into the promised land from the mountain-top, but that is not enough. I must get at the trail, and I have again found the living key to the lost Ophir."

Not far from the spot of the encounter with Gilbert, Keen Kennard found a horse which seemed to recognize him. He did not mount, but merely grasped the bridle and led Gilbert on.

Mile after mile was covered.

More than once the man from Shasta looked behind him and listened intently; but no figure was seen gliding over the trail; no footsteps gave out a warning sound.

"I'll try him now," said Kennard, halting at last where the trail was wide, and its borders the sloping sides of twin mountains. "I'll go about it easy, but gods! he cannot know how eager I am to get at this secret that has fascinated me. Keen Kennard, a gold maniac? I believe I am getting there rapidly."

For the first time the detective dropped the youth's hand and seemed to let him feel that he was at liberty.

Gilbert straightened and stepping closer looked into Kennard's face.

"He seems to know me at last," murmured the man from Shasta. "What will his first words indicate—madness or sense?"

For several moments Gilbert faced the gold-detective, and the look which was at first a stare softened until it appeared rational.

Keen Kennard took hope.

"Ho! ho! ho! The vultures find the gold at last!" suddenly cried the youth. "They see it from the sky and chase all the jackals off. Who comes to Gilbert for the yellow dust? He runs from the vulture! When he shakes his head, it rattles with gold nuggets!"

The youth turned suddenly with the last word and started off, but prepared for anything, Keen Kennard darted forward and clutched his arm.

In an instant Gilbert seemed transformed into a tiger, and all at once with a cry hardly human, he threw himself upon the Shastan and buried his fingers in his throat before he could resist.

"In the clutches of a demon," ejaculated Kennard, as he was forced back under his steed's feet, where he fell, with Gilbert a-top and with the hands of the mad youth feeling behind his windpipe.

The detective struggled, but insanity seemed to have lent Gilbert supernatural strength. Oh, for a moment of Dagger Johnny now!

"Gilbert will kill the mountain vulture!" hissed the maniac.

"I'm no vulture. For God's sake, Gilbert—"

Then all was still!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLACK MASK WINS.

BACK in Red Eye during these proceedings in the sierra, Vera the Viper, guarded by the bronze pards, stood by Grim George's grave, waiting for Dropshot Bluff.

Neither she nor her watchers saw the masked woman confront the alcalde before his own cabin, and they did not know that she was coming with him to the spot chosen for the sorceress's death.

"Hyer's the captain!" suddenly exclaimed a pard, and a moment later Dropshot Bluff appeared on the scene, but not alone.

The men uttered exclamations of surprise when they beheld the masked mystery at the alcalde's side, and Vera gave a slight start.

"So we meet once more," said Queen Moro, coolly, and with a mad light in her eyes as she stepped forward and glared into the Viper's face. "What did I tell you when we last parted? You have not forgotten, woman?"

"Your farewell hasn't bothered me," replied Vera, returning the look fearlessly.

Queen Moro glanced at the alcalde.

"What I have told you must take place. I want that woman."

"You?" cried Dropshot.

"I! You have brought her hither for execution. You were going to shoot her dead on the grave of the man she killed."

"By Heaven, I war! She shot Grim George without a chance for his life."

"No!" suddenly cried Vera, and she stepped forward despite the menacing looks and revolvers of the men who faced her. "If Grim George could speak, he'd give the lie to those words, Dropshot Bluff. I gave him time to draw; I told him who I was. I gave him ten seconds, but he laughed in my face when he had two revolvers in his belt. He had time, but he would not fight. Then I killed the infamous wretch!"

"And I am to let this woman go—ter turn her over to you?" said the alcalde to Queen Moro.

"Yes."

"I am ter let her hunt me with a cocked revolver an' false accusations on her tongue?"

Vera broke suddenly into a strange laugh.

"Let this stop here!" she exclaimed. "I am Red Eye's prisoner, and the man who has the right to put an end to my life, if any man possesses that right, is Dropshot Bluff. But he knows that his own existence he forfeited long ago in Mormondom."

"Ther old lie!" roared the alcalde. "We end the farce whar we ar'! I can't grant yer request, Queen Moro. We don't deal with people ashamed ter show their faces. I have taken vengeance in my own hands. Face yer doom, sorceress of Red Eye. Justice glares from Dropshot's dropper. This is the vengeance ov ther mountain sport!"

The big alcalde turned abruptly from the masked queen and seemed about to throw himself forward at Vera.

"I say no!" suddenly cried the Sacramento mystery. "Kill the sorceress of Red Eye, and I will stain the shirts of your pards here with your blood."

"Choke ther black mask!" growled the men.

"If you dare, gentlemen of the sierra," said Queen Moro stepping back, and throwing up a revolver which seemed to cover the whole astonished crowd at once. "The motive that has sent me upon this trail will not check my finger if a hand is lifted against me or if one of you advance a step. I don't want to antagonize Red Eye, but I will have my way here in this matter if blood flows. That woman knows why I would save her from your alcalde's revolver. The liberty I could give her may be that now enjoyed by the man beneath our feet."

"Oh ef thet's it," grated Dropshot Bluff biting his lips, "thar she is! It really makes no particular difference ter this camp who avenges Grim George so it's well done. Your enemy, eh, Queen Moro? Woman ag'in' woman, I see. Take yer victim!"

Dropshot Bluff looked into the leveled revolver of the strange woman while he spoke. He saw the hand that held the weapon with the steadiness of the tried desperado, and the eyes that gleamed behind it.

"Thar she is," he repeated waving his hand toward the sorceress. "You'll hardly shoot her on ther grave ov Grim, I think."

"Why not? What matters it to me where I pay her for the act that rankles in my heart?" said Queen Moro turning upon Vera. "Gentlemen of the sierra, because against my wishes she looked beneath the mask I wear, she has forfeited her life. Vera, are you ready?"

A quick stride carried the Sacramento queen to within several feet of the beautiful woman standing erect in the light of lamp and star and their black eyes met.

"I cannot spare you," Queen Moro went on. "You would not spare me when I begged for mercy, not for my life, but to spare me that disgrace which is more bitter than death. You would not, woman. Your hand tore off my mask and you looked into that face which I swore no person should see until I was ready to strike the blow of vengeance for the past. I grant you a minute of life. Heaven forbid."

Vera the Viper as these rough men call you, that I should hurl you into eternity with no time for preparation."

It was a strange sight, the two woman face to face in the presence of the wild men of Red Eye Bar, one covering the other with a revolver, the victim calm and collected with one foot on Grim George's grave, and with a faint smile at her finely chiseled lips.

"Go on," said Vera. "If my time has come I am ready. Do your worst, Queen Moro, and send into the dark future with me one of those gold secrets which have excited States."

"She knows it!" suddenly cried the alcalde. "By ther eternal! she has not played sorceress of Red Eye for nothin'! She has wrested the secret ov Ophir from ther gold youth of Gold Gorge!"

Vera's eyes twinkled; she had played her last card and there were indications that the throw had not been lost.

Queen Moro was seen to start.

"Maybe it is a trick of hers," she said to herself. "Can this woman know the way to the missing bonanza? If I slay her shall I lose the golden trail?"

The sorceress of Red Eye seemed to see the doubts and the hesitation which had taken possession of the masked trailer.

"What I know the revolver may seal up forever," she went on, at the proper moment. "Do the duty you spoke of, Queen Moro. I am the woman who raised your mask and looked into your face. It was a crime for which perhaps I deserve to die. The minute is up already. Ha! ha have I unnerved your arm?"

Instead of releveing the weapon she had thrust into Vera's face, Queen Moro grasped the sorceress's wrist and shot her an indescribable look of anxiety.

"Do you really know?" she asked. "In the name of Heaven, tell me the truth. It is a question of life and death. Do you know?"

"I know!"

That was all. The Sacramento woman recoiled but she did not release Vera's wrist.

"This woman belongs to me," she said facing the alcalde and his pards.

"Not with that secret at her disposal!" cried Dropshot Bluff.

"With life and the secret!" was the cool answer. "You will keep your distance, Dropshot Bluff; men of Red Eye, you will stand where you are! I am on a trail that leads to more than gold. The next time you entrap Vera the Viper be sure that Queen Moro is not in the vicinity. I don't save her for friendship. I hate her as woman never hated woman before. I could blow her brains out before your eyes. One of these days you may find the vultures soaring over her dead body in the heart of the sierras!"

She threw a look at the Red Eye witch as she finished and started off.

"On one condition you take that woman off!" cried Dropshot Bluff.

"Well?" answered Queen Moro, with a smile.

"It is that you throw up that mask an' give Red Eye a glimpse ov yer face."

The reply was a derisive laugh.

"You ask too much, my Red Eye doves," said the masked woman. "Why, I'd sooner spoil it first with my six shooter. Not to-night, Dropshot."

"Then, by Jericho! we'll see for ourselves."

"Not in this wild land! The man who lifts a hand to raise my mask drops dead in his tracks like a dog! Good-night, gentlemen."

There was laughing mockery in the last three words, and the pards of the mountain camp saw Queen Moro walk off with one hand encircling Vera's wrist.

"Cool as an iceberg!" exclaimed one of the men. "That woman plays a hand which no livin' man kin beat. Thar she goes, gents, with ther secret we've hunted up an' down ther sierra from Gold Gorge ter Red Eye an' back ag'in five hundred times."

Dropshot Bluff did not seem to hear the remarks. He was following with his gaze the two figures disappearing toward the mountain. It appeared like a dream to the big alcalde.

"Let ther cap'n be," whispered one of the pards. "He can't realize what hez happened, an' hang me! ef I hardly kin. Ter think thet Vera played sorceress hyer for months an' got from Gilbert what he'd never give us! It beats me—it's a thunderbolt! Let's go back."

The suggestion was acted upon so silently that Dropshot Bluff did not hear the withdrawal. One by one the roughs of Red Eye stole away and left him by the grave of Grim George. When he lost sight of Queen Moro and her companion he found himself alone.

"I've had cold decks played ag'in' me, but never one like thet!" he cried. "Hyar I bring Vera the Viper ter ther grave ov Grim ter sprinkle it with her blood; but thet masked woman steps in between us an' takes ther Viper away. An' I let her do it—I ther alcalde ov Red Eye who once for three days held a gentile camp at bay! Hev I lost my grip? By ther eternal, Grim, yer death must hev weakened Dropshot Bluff!"

He went to the grave and bent above the sod until lately pressed by the foot of the sorceress.

"I swear ter get her yet, Grim!" he went on. "I allowed Queen Moro ter take her off ter-night. I almost hed ter. But I will hold her ag'in before my revolver, and then all ther livin' powers on earth sha'n't hold back yer old pard's vengeance. She war several times on ther eve ov revealin' me ter Red Eye, but each time I checked her. If they knew, I might not have a single pard at my back when ther crisis comes, for the whole world hez heard ov our work in Utah. Never mind, Grim; I will get her yet!"

He rose and stepped back, then turned and walked rapidly toward the camp.

Nobody stopped him although more than one man saw him pass down the street before the row of cabins. He went not to his own shanty, but to another near by, at the door of which he knocked.

Immediately he heard somebody inside spring forward, and then he asked:

"Ar' yer up, Floss?"

The opening of the door was answer enough, and the alcalde of Red Eye stepped in to the presence of Floss Mogalle, who recoiled from his wild, strange countenance.

"Ah! you know a part of what has happened?" he said, noticing the girl's white face in the light of the little lamp.

"Pardon me," was the reply. "I have witnessed all."

"Ther scenes at Grim's grave?" exclaimed the alcalde astonished.

"Yes."

"Wal, you saw ther coolest woman in California do somethin' ten men would hev died at. Your little enemy has come back; she has robbed our revolvers of the life of ther sorceress of Red Eye. You saw it all, you say. Tell me, Floss, what you know about Queen Moro. She has been your guardian. You have lived under the same roof with her. Didn't you ever get a glimpse of her face? You have once told me no, but I never pressed the question. Tell me, now. Floss. While you were with her did she never allow you so much as a glimpse of her face not once?"

The hand of the big alcalde was at the girl's arm, and his fingers seemed to sink into her flesh as she drew back.

"Why do you want to know?" asked Floss.

"Never mind. I have just recalled something. That woman I think is the paid spy of the worst enemies I possess."

"Queen Moro a paid spy?" No! exclaimed the girl. "She sent a spy to this region, but she is none herself."

"I will test that hereafter. But her face! I want ter know about thet. What is it like? You have seen it; you deceived me when I asked you before. Tell me now. She is gone. The hand of the black mask won't fly at yer throat when you reply. Remember thet this is Red Eye Bar, an' thet Dropshot Bluff is boss hyer. Now, about Queen Moro's face?"

"I cannot," said Floss. "If I mention it I will not sleep to-night, and after what I have seen I need rest."

"But you must, girl!" exclaimed the alcalde.

"Has she no cheeks?"

"Yes! I stole a look at her when she knew it not. She has sworn to hunt down and kill the person who shall lift her mask. I never saw a face like hers. There is not its counterpart on earth."

"What is it? For God's sake, Floss—"

"The brand—the awful brand!" cried the girl breaking from the alcalde's clutch. "I wish my eyes had never seen it. It has haunted me since that terrible hour. No, no! for heavens sake don't force my tongue to describe it. I will not."

Dropshot Bluff looked in amazement at Floss.

"Keep the secret, then," he said.

CHAPTER XVIII.

REDEYE'S OUTLAW.

FLOSS MOGALLE was alone again, but her eyes were still fixed on the door which had closed behind the boss of Red Eye Bar.

She trembled yet, and she still felt Dropshot Bluff's hand at her wrist.

"Why does he want to know about the face behind Queen Moro's mask?" the girl asked herself. "Does he fear it is the face of some deadly enemy who has tracked him down? It cannot be that, for the woman has had more than once chance to take his life. She wants the lost Ophir to carry out some revenge in 'Frisco. Her whole life is bent to that. What will she do with the woman she rescued and took from camp? Vera the Viper raised her mask and looked at the face I saw once, and she has sworn to kill the person who looked upon it. Will she kill the sorceress of Red Eye Bar?"

No voice answered the girl.

"If I could find the trail she took, I would solve the question for myself," she went on. "I saw her take Vera away. I might find the trail by going down to Grim George's grave which I can certainly reach without a guide."

Thus resolved, Floss went to the door which opened suddenly in her face, and she stopped before the stalwart man who presented himself.

"I beg yer pardon, girl," he said. "I am Duncan. I am goin' away from Red Eye. Dropshot an' I can't hitch any longer. It warn't much ov a quarrel, but it war enough. I told 'im ter go slow about dealin' with Vera, but he gave me ther insult an' dashed ahead till he lost 'er at Grim's grave. Thet's enough for Duncan. I'm hyer ter say good-by an' ter add, girl, thet ther sooner you git out o' this vulture nest ther better for yer future fortunes."

Floss started and looked into the speaker's face. There seemed no deception there. Duncan was a handsome man with long black hair and sparkling eyes, the very ideal of a fearless dandy ruffian.

"Thar! don't ask me any questions," he went on, seeing Floss's eagerness. "I don't want ter deal any back-handed blows while I give ther camp ther grand bounce. Ther boys all know thet I'm goin'. I'll stop, an' say farewell ter Dropshot; it'll be nothin' more than thet—no fight, girl, for I'm cool, an' in ther best ov humor. This is a vulture-nest for you, Floss, an' ef you stay hyer ther time will come when you may wish yerself back in Sacramento under the eyes ov Queen Moro."

"Anywhere but there," said Floss, with a perceptible shudder.

"Red Eye, then, eh?"

"No, no! but something holds me here. Gilbert—"

Duncan interrupted her with a laugh.

"He might be found in the mountains, mad ag'in, and jabberin' about ther lost Ophir, which we've hunted like a pack ov fools for years."

"Do you think so?" cried the girl, springing toward the speaker. "Then, for heaven's sake, show me Gilbert's trail!"

"An' set Dropshot Bluff an' pards arter you?"

"I care not who follows me! My life-work is to find Gilbert. I wouldn't touch an ounce of the lost wealth. I don't want it. Duncan, be my friend. I am friendless here. Fate guided my team to Red Eye Bar. Be you my guide to fortune—to Gilbert!"

For a moment the handsome rough stood erect and looked down into the beautiful and pleading face upturned to him. Floss seemed irresistible.

"It'll throw Dropshot arter me," muttered Duncan. "We'll hev ter cross bowies metbbe ef I help this girl off, an' ef I do, I'll hev ter stan' by her through thick an' thin. By ther jumpin' stars, I'll do it! What's ther use ov half crossin' ther alcalde ov Red Eye? He'll hate me none ther less ef I go ther hull rope."

The girl appeared to catch his decision in his eyes, for her hand darting forward, closed on his brawny arm.

"You are going to show me Gilbert's trail!" she cried, in raptures of joy.

"I am goin' to take yer from Red Eye," was the answer. "It can't be a bad move, girl, for hyer thar ar' vulture eyes upon yer. We'll hev ter unite our fortunes, I expect. You'll hev ter freeze ter Duncan, for ther moment ther truth is known I'll be outlawed accordin' ter ther rules ov this camp."

"Then I go alone if I go," said Floss. "I ask no man to outlaw himself for me."

"Ho, ho! thet's nothin' much," laughed Duncan. "A man what's passed through as many flint-mills as I hev don't keer much for a decree. Ef you will go ter Grim George's grave, ef you know whar it is, I'll j'ine yer thar within ten minutes."

"I can find it, but you—"

"Courtesy forces me ter tell Dropshot that I've cut loose from Red Eye. I'll make myself his outlaw in cool blood; he shall know thet I'm goin'. Remember! I'll j'ine you, Floss, whar we planted ther pard Vera killed."

A minute later the stalwart sport of Red Eye found himself once more beyond the girl's cabin.

"Ye've got ter stan' by ther Sacramento pink, Duncan," he said to himself. "An' when yer cut loose from Red Eye ye forfeit all claims ter Ophir ef found by Dropshot or pards."

The rough directed his steps toward the cabin occupied by the alcalde, for as he told Floss it was his intention to say farewell to Dropshot Bluff before exiling himself from camp.

At the same time Floss had stolen from her cabin, and was gliding noiselessly toward the appointed rendezvous.

Duncan was soon made aware of the fact that the alcalde's cabin was occupied, for a light beyond the little window at one side of the door grew more distinct as he advanced.

Dropshot Bluff was alone and seated at the table upon which with a piece of chalk in his hand he had traced a number of lines intelligible no doubt only to him.

The door pushed open by Duncan made a noise that caused the alcalde to raise his head, and with a frown he recognized the man who came in without invitation.

Duncan shut the door carefully behind him and walked to the table. The alcalde's dark eyes were fixed upon him as if he half expected to see his old pard leap over the table.

"I've come to say 'good-by' ter Red Eye," began Duncan.

That sentence, common enough under the circumstances, seemed a match about to be tossed into a powder bin.

Dropshot Bluff started and almost left his stool.

"Don't disturb yerself," continued Duncan with a smile. "It's only one man goin' off. Cap'n, we can't git along. I don't like ter cross yer any more whar ye've been alcalde an' boss so long, so I've concluded ter leave ther field clear. I relinquish my claim ter ther lost Ophir unless," with a broader smile, "unless I should stumble on it myself. We can't hitch any longer, cap'n, arter what crossed yer lips ter-night. Yer went too fast with Vera an' lost 'er."

Up leaped the alcalde of Red Eye and the next moment he was coming around the table with a pair of flashing orbs fixed on Duncan when the long-haired sport waved him off.

"I'm not hyer for a clinch," said Duncan. "I came ter say good-by ter Red Eye. I don't sneak off like a wolf. I go when you know I'm goin'. I don't expect ter find Ophir, Dropshot, but I merely remarked that should I stumble on it, I'll not throw up my claim ter my share."

The alcalde stopped. He knew the man who had come to say good-by. Did he see the tiger that showed his teeth behind his long black lashes?

"Yer goin' will outlaw you!" growled Dropshot. "You know ther laws ov Red Eye."

"I know all."

"Yer playin' ther boy," sneered the alcalde. "Yes, I guess ye'd better go."

"All right."

Duncan was trying to keep back the madness that seemed to rend him. Dropshot's sneer had cut like a bowie.

"Fare ye well," he went on. "Ten years ov huntin' for ther lost bonanza hev resulted in—nothin'. Gilbert still holds his secret from Red Eye, an' you let a masked woman walk off with ther only person who has listened ter ther boy with success. Arter all this I ought ter go."

Duncan moved toward the door and his bronze hand put behind him was on the latch when Dropshot Bluff came forward again.

"Ar' ye goin' alone?" he asked.

"Who'd I take along?" was the coolly-spoken rejoinder. "I hev'n't stirred ther pards ter mutiny. No man in Red Eye but yerself knows that Duncan has made up his mind to leave."

"Then git out o' camp as quick as possible. I make no promises. I may hunt you down, for we have sworn ter show no mercy ter traitors an'—"

"What's that, cap'n?" And Duncan's hand left the latch as one foot crept forward. "I'm anything but that foul galoot. But, no! I didn't come hyer for a fight. I said that I'd keep my temper ef it took ther hide, an' I will. Hunt me ef ye will, but let me say that ther man who leaves Red Eye is able ter take keer ov himself."

The door opened to the hand of the Red Eye pard, and as the two men exchanged looks in which there was but little friendship, Duncan stepped across the threshold and was gone!

"One fool less!" grated Dropshot Bluff, as he went back to the table and took up the chalk again. "I wouldn't care much ef ther hull blamed camp turned ther backs on me. I'd hev it all ter Floss an' myself then, an' when I get ter ther doors ov Ophir thar'd be nothin' ter divide."

For some minutes there was no sound in the alcalde's cabin.

The chalk as it moved across the surface of the table made no noise, and Dropshot Bluff tediously drew the lines he had seen Gilbert draw once on his own table.

Still on the hunt of that lost mine which, after all, might prove one of the greatest myths of the century! Still gold-haunted and trail-lost, but striving to get at the mystery in a manner that promised no beneficial results!

Dropshot Bluff drew and erased. He seemed to have forgotten the scene at Grim George's grave; Vera and Queen Moro in passing from sight appeared to have passed also from mind.

"Hang it all! I can't get at it!" suddenly cried the alcalde. "I didn't see the map long enough ter get a grip on it. I must depend on Gilbert for it after all. When I next get at ther boy, I'll shoot ther information from him! What ef Duncan took some ov ther boys along? Jupiter! he didn't interfere with Floss, I hope. No; brave as he is, he knew better than to cross the alcalde ov Red Eye in ther particular! However thar'll be no danger in lookin'."

At that moment something seemed to strike the door.

Dropshot Bluff drew a revolver and went toward it. He listened intently with his finger on the latch.

"Thar war suthin' out thar," he muttered. "My ears hev never fooled me yet."

Yes "something" was on the outside.

If he could have seen the human figure that had walked into Red Eye with unsteady step he would have opened the door without listening. It actually leaned against the cabin.

Dropshot Bluff at last opened the door, and put one foot across the log at the bottom.

"Mebbe, arter all—"

"Ter hades with ther pard thet leaves another one dyin' in his shanty!"

The alcalde of Red Eye started back with a wild exclamation of horror, and fell against the table almost losing his balance.

"Who says I did that?" he ejaculated.

"Ther man what faces ther boss ov Red Eye!" was the reply.

"Jehosophat! Dagger Johnny!"

"Bet yer life, Cap'n Bluff. Hev ther unspeakable joy ter look inter ther dropper I hold in my clutches, an' send ahead ov yer soul a prayer for pardon!"

The thunderstruck alcalde could not speak. If the grave on the mountain-side had opened and released Grim George, he would not have been more astonished, for Dagger Johnny was the last man he expected to see before him.

"Ar' ye through, cap'n?" resumed the wounded sport, with a grin, while he leaned against the rough jamb and with both hands steadied the revolver thrust into the alcalde's face. "I guess this is Johnny's last shot, an' it'll be some satisfaction to send ahead ov 'im ther man who spurned 'im when dyin' for a gold myth. Oh! thar's no mercy at my heart, Dropshot. I'm a tiger just broke loose from Tartarus!"

"Give me a word, Johnny. I thought yer dead when I left yer. I—"

"I don't want a lie, cap'n. Ef thet's ther kind ov goods ye'r goin' ter deal in, I'll send yer on with a full stock."

The next sound was the report of a revolver, and Dropshot Bluff reeled and pitched across the table.

CHAPTER XIX.

BETWEEN TWO FATES.

So much for ther one!" grated the wild-eyed man who leaned against the door and stared at the effect of his shot. "I guess he'll never leave another dyin' pard for a gold myth. Wal, hardly, cap'n. It isn't healthy when Dagger Johnny's ther one thet's left."

He seemed to recover strength while he stood there, for all at once he drew back and walked away. His step was still unsteady; he had the gleam of a tiger in his eyes, and his fingers clutched the revolver which had just covered the boss of Red Eye Bar.

Dagger Johnny did not stop until he reached the cabin lately occupied by Gilbert. He opened the door and looked in.

"Not back yet, eh?" he muttered. "Ther last I saw ov ther youngster he war bein' marched off by Keen Kennard, ther Shasta Sleuth. Ef he war hyer, by Jupiter! I'd choke ther secret out o' him; but I can't skin a fox before he's caught."

Dagger Johnny suddenly went back up the one street of Red Eye.

"I'll take one more look at ther cap'n," he murmured, stepping to the alcalde's cabin, and the next moment he was leaning inside.

"Gone!" was the sudden ejaculation. "By hokey! I left 'im hyer dead not twenty minutes ago. I'll have ter investigate this a little."

"You'll investigate nothin'!" was spoken behind him in terrible tones. "Put one foot across thet threshold, an' I'll shoot yer ter pieces!"

Dagger Johnny looked behind him and saw in the starlight the stalwart figure of the alcalde, a revolver in each hand and a demon in his eyes.

"About face!" continued Dropshot Bluff. "Advance toward me, Dagger Johnny, or I'll cash yer life checks whar you stan'! Let thet dropper slide ter ther ground, please. I don't like it whar it is, though ye'r not very harmful at short range."

"Didn't I hit yer?" gasped the Red Eye pard, as he was forced to relinquish the weapon.

"A graze, nothin' more!" laughed the alcalde. "I saw yer hands shakin' while ye war holdin' ther shooter. Can't yer shoot better nor thet, old pard?"

Dagger Johnny did not know what to say, but he growled to himself:

"Ef I hed it ter do over, by heavens! I'd do ther job up in apple-pie order. You'd better fix me right away, cap'n, fer I'll git my work in ef yer don't."

The leveled weapons of the big alcalde forced Dagger Johnny forward and almost up to their muzzles.

"Hyar I am, cap'n," he said. "I'm not much o' count as a physical beauty. I've been keepin' up under a strain ever since I fought Queen Moro for ther boy's map."

"I want yer ter walk ahead o' me ter ther boys," said the boss of Red Eye.

"Which means thet I'm ter be tried by a sort o' court-martial for breakin' one ov our rules?"

"Perhaps. Keep right ahead. I'll tell yer when ter stop. Yer shot straight at my head."

Dagger Johnny's eyes said "yes" in language not to be mistaken, and in the best step he could assume he walked ahead of the alcalde along the street.

"One word, cap'n," he suddenly said, as he halted, despite the menace of eye and revolver. "What would yer give for information about Gilbert?"

Dropshot Bluff gave a start which was noticed by the threatened rough.

"Yer don't know," he said.

"Don't I?" said Dagger Johnny, his eyes twinkling. "What shell ther bargain be, cap'n?"

The alcalde did not reply for a moment. He seemed to see in the man before him only the

person who but a few minutes before had attempted to take his life.

"We'll bargain after ther trial," he said.

"Forward! Johnny."

"But I know," persisted the Red Eye pard.

"See hyer. Ef you don't move along I'll scatter yer brains over yer shoulders!"

Dagger Johnny clinched hands and teeth.

"I'll stan' no show with ther boys ef Dropshot catches ther eyes," he said to himself. "In this camp pard shows no mercy ter pard when ther test comes. I may get over ther work ov Queen Moro's knife ef I hev a chance; but unless I kin wriggle out ov this trap, I'll stan' a mighty slim chance ov gettin' my clutches on ther Ophir. I've got ter take another tack. Cap'n Bluff," he said aloud, halting again, "what ef I hed a genuine map ov ther mine—one worth a thousand ov ther kind matted with blood?"

"But ye hev'n't—go on!" was the reply.

"I hev, I swear it!" cried Dagger Johnny.

"We'll find it arter ther court-martial," said the alcalde coldly.

The game had failed again, and once more Dagger Johnny ground his teeth, and marched ahead of Dropshot's revolver.

"I've got ter stick it out, I guess," he said sullenly, and relapsed into silence.

Three minutes later several men suddenly confronted the mountain roughs, and stared at the alcalde's revolvers and their prisoner.

"Call ther boys hyer. We've got ter try a pard," said Dropshot. "It's a hard thing ter do, but this ar' one ov ther times when it can't be avoided."

The command was obeyed, and in a short time Dagger Johnny, still showing the effects of his desperate encounter with Queen Moro, leaned against a cabin and looked into the faces of the pards of Red Eye, who stood revealed by the light of several lamps.

"Ther charge is attempted murder," said the alcalde, glancing from the prisoner to the bronze crowd, jury and executioners, at once. "He will not deny it. Thar stands ther man who came back ter Red Eye awhile ago, an' shot at my head with a dropper clutched by two hands. Ask him."

The men turned to the Red Eye pard. Their looks were questions.

"I did it," said Dagger Johnny, stepping clear of the shanty. "Pards ov Red Eye, Dropshot Bluff stan's thar because my eye failed me. I war in no condition ter do sure work. See hyer."

He threw wide his dark gray jacket and showed the crowd the shirt glued to his bosom with his own blood. The wild men pressed eagerly forward.

"I got it in ther service ov Red Eye," he went on. "I fought for ther key ter ther lost bonanza, which we've trailed like a pack ov wolves for ten years. I got it. I fetched it hyer, an' threw it ter Dropshot Bluff. I thought then I war at ther end ov ther string, an' when my senses swam that man left me. It is a part ov pardship thet while life lasts, brother must stand by brother. Ther alcalde ov Red Eye has broken that rule. I wandered from camp. Madness an' my wounds drove me back. I forgot ther woman who cut me—I didn't think ov ther lost Ophir. Vengeance directed me ter Dropshot Bluff's shanty. I saw him only, an' while ther fit war on, ter see war ter shoot. Thet's ther hull case, gents. I put in no plea ov self-defense. Put yerselves in my place. It is ther unwritten law ov ther sierra thet when pard deserts pard, ther man deserted may kill."

The men had listened breathless to Dagger Johnny. He stepped back, and rested his case. He didn't like the jury, but he could not choose another to his own liking. He had to submit.

"Ef I thought him alive I'd not hev left 'im," said the alcalde with a smile. "Ther pards ov Red Eye know Dropshot Bluff too well ter call him false. He shot ter kill; his nervousness foiled his aim. Thar must be one ov two verdicts in a case ov this kind—immediate death or eternal banishment, ter be shot on sight."

"Whatever yer verdict be, yer can't cheat this sierra sample out o' much bliss," said Dagger Johnny with a strange smile. "Put yerselves in my place; thet's all I ask."

The sierra court so suddenly convened in the lamp-light, looked puzzled. They would have to decide between two pards, one the alcalde himself, the other a man who had made himself a favorite of the camp.

Dropshot Bluff kept the men constantly under his eye as if he feared that to omit the espionage for a moment would be to lose the game.

Several minutes of singular silence passed away, the lamps flickered over the heads of the mountain court.

At last one of the men asked permission to retire for a minute; it was granted and Dropshot Bluff and the prisoner were left alone. They looked at one another but did not speak and the silence was unbroken till the men came back.

Dagger Johnny tried to read the verdict in the faces of the sierra pards; so did the big alcalde.

"It is pard an' pard," said one of the jury, looking at Dropshot Bluff while he spoke. "We hope we may never hev another case like this. Our verdict is—"

The interested pards started forward.

"Banishment!" finished the spokesman. The alcalde scowled.

"I had better fixed him myself," he muttered.

"Thanks," said Dagger Johnny smiling. "I walk from Red Eye banished forever from their old camp whar we've been pard. Hades! what need I keer in ther fix I am!" and he struck his breast. "Accordin' ter ther law, banishment means ter be hunted an' shot on sight."

"We'll not add thet, Johnny, because we don't intend ter do it," was the reply. "This verdict war dragged out o' yer jury. It had ter be one ov ther two. Ther other one war death, dearly hated by us all!"

"Oh, let's get over this," said the boss of Red Eye. "Ther verdict has been pronounced. Thar ar' two trails leadin' from Red Eye. Ther doomed man kin take his choice. He knows 'em both."

Snapping off his last sentence the big alcalde turned away with a look of fierce triumph not unmingled with disappointment.

"You go yer way, I'll go mine," hissed Dagger Johnny, covering Dropshot Bluff with outstretched hand. "Arter all, my trail may be longer than yours, Dropshot. Banished an' wounded, I may turn on the tiger ov ther old camp."

"Turn an' be hanged!" came over the broad shoulders of the alcalde, as he kept on.

"Good-by, pard," continued Dagger Johnny. "I'm no express train ter-night, but I'll get thar all ther same. Don't be alarmed ef Dagger Johnny meets yer at ther door of ther lost Ophir."

"What's that?" exclaimed several voices.

"Let that man go!" cried the alcalde, who stood a few feet away. "What's a verdict ef it isn't carried into effect?"

The mountain jury slunk back, and the banished man laughed derisively at the alcalde.

"Thet's so! what's a verdict for ef yer don't respect it?" he said. "I won't bother yer any longer, boys."

He straightened, waved his hand to the group, and walked away with the firmest step he could command.

More than one eye followed him.

"That man knows suthin'," passed from lip to lip.

The next moment the alcalde appeared in their midst.

"It war a one hoss verdict!" he exclaimed, full of rage. "I didn't ask for it. I wanted ther other one. You must see nothin' but justice when yer pass on a man."

"But we couldn't help feelin' thet it war Dagger Johnny, cap'n, thet he war at death's door—"

"At death's folde rol!" roared the alcalde. "In the sierra, banished men may be shot on sight. I'll attend ter this one!"

CHAPTER XX.

SHASTA TO THE RESCUE.

"I FEEL the fingers of that mad boy at my throat whenever I think of the fight. It was a close call; about the closest I ever had. I don't fancy another."

Keen Kennard stood in the shadow of a tree some distance from Red Eye, four days after Dagger Johnny's banishment.

The sun was soon to drop behind the western horizon, and the shadows about the Shasta Sleuth were long and cool.

We left him, as the reader knows, on the ground, and at the mercy of Gilbert Golden, the lost man of Gold Gorge. Kennard's throat was in the mad boy's grip, and the detective almost believed that his last hour had come.

The truth is, that Gilbert thought he had finished him, and when he walked away, the man from Shasta lay like one dead across the sierra trail. As we have just heard him remark, it was a close call; he knew no other like it in his eventful life.

Four days later he stood where we now find him, the same determined man as ever.

If he was waiting for any particular person he was not disappointed, for a horse and his rider appeared suddenly in the trail and came toward him.

Keen Kennard stepped back into the shadows and watched this person.

"Vera the sorceress!" he ejaculated. "Now I will know something perhaps."

He waited until the horse was opposite his retreat then he stepped suddenly into the trail and laid his hand on the bridle.

"Watching me, were you?" cried the rider.

"For the last three minutes," was the answer.

"You haven't found the bonanza yet, Keen Kennard?"

"No."

"Do you think you ever will?"

"I do."

Vera laughed.

"Fool!" she cried, and then bending over she laid her hand on Keen Kennard's shoulder.

"You may be wanted at Red Eye just now," she went on. "Are you afraid to go down there?"

"I am not. What has happened?"

"Several important events. Gilbert has come back."

"Mad?"

"No, sane; but don't throw a question into my eyes, Kennard—he has revealed nothing.

Then, Floss is missing—she has eloped with Duncan, the best pard the camp ever possessed. Next, Dagger Johnny has been banished."

Keen Kennard greeted this news with an exclamation.

"You carry all the news!" he said with a smile. "But you have omitted one person."

"Have I?"

"Queen Moro."

The sorceress of Red Eye started perceptibly and smiled.

"I have not forgotten her. I cannot do that," she said. "I thought my life was not worth the turn of a card when she took me from under the Red Eye revolvers at Grim George's grave and marched me into the mountain. It was her intention to kill me there for having looked upon her face, but when I stood before her alone and at her mercy, her heart failed her. The revolver cocked for my destruction was gripped in her right hand, she told me that no person should see her face and live; but I am here, ha, ha!"

"Yes," said the detective. "I'll wager my hat that it was the first time that strange woman ever backed down."

"She failed with me before her at any rate," continued Vera. "All at once, and when I was expecting a bullet, she turned away and left me alone, the most amazed person you ever saw."

"Without a word?"

"Without a single one. That woman is a mystery. She wants the lost Ophir to play some kind of a game in 'Frisco. It is a game of vengeance, but I have no clew to it. She says that when she doffs her mask it will be to throw it at the feet of a lot of ruined and doomed men."

"In 'Frisco, eh?"

"Yes."

"I would like to ask you again what her face is like, but I know you would not tell me," said Keen Kennard. "I shall see for myself one of these days. So you think I had better go to Red Eye?"

"Gilbert is there. He has the gold secret."

"But Queen Moro may find Floss in the mountains. That girl was once in her hands. She hates the girl and all her kin, she says. I am here at the masked mystery's command. I swore to lay the key to the lost Ophir at her feet."

"While you shall never do that," said Vera, "you might go back and protect Gilbert."

"I ought to, perhaps. When I saw him last his hands were at my throat, and he was trying to choke me to death."

"He was mad then; he is sane now. He is in danger. Keen Kennard, if you do find the gold key you must find it where Gilbert is. There is no other recourse for you. If you are no coward you will go at once to Red Eye; the battle ground is there, and not in these mountains."

"Where are you going?"

"I will not be far off," smiled Vera. "Whatever you do in Red Eye, and they may cover you if your presence be discovered, do not end the life of its alcalde."

"Your friend, eh?"

"My bitterest foe!" cried the sorceress. "There were two of them until lately; there is but one now. I tell you, Keen Kennard, the crime committed in Mormondom shall not be forgotten. Don't question me about it. Let the future recall my words. Go to Red Eye. Gilbert was not responsible for his actions when he had you by the throat. Poor boy! that awful journey from Ophir back to Gold Gorge, turned his head."

"I will go!" exclaimed the Shasta detective. "Hang me! if you ain't better than Queen Moro to send me upon a trail. I will go back, and woe to the hand that harms that boy."

"I like you," laughed Vera. "If I could, I would go myself. I almost wish I could show you the mine, but my oath prevents. I showed you the land of promise from the mountain top. I can go no further, Kennard, of Shasta. You may be going to your death when you go down to Red Eye; it is barely possible that you are going to Ophir. You must take the chances."

"I always take them!" cried the Shasta Sleuth.

"You will find hiding places in and about Red Eye," the sorceress went on. "You will enter the camp from the east if you go from here. Let me warn you to shun the fourth cabin from the end."

"Why?"

"It is merely a trap. Its floor has a large trap-door in the middle that opens under the slightest weight. It stands over a natural pit which was there when Dropshot Bluff and his pards built their shanties. That pit has never been fathomed; it is like the bottomless one. Three men, supposed to be Gentile spies by the alcalde, came to Red Eye last year and suddenly disappeared. I traced them to that cabin; that was enough. I thought it best to post you."

"I thank you," said Keen Kennard. "I do not propose to join the missing trio. Where can I meet you at the end of three days?"

"Here."

"Agreed! At the end of that time I will be here."

"If you escape the pit, remember!" smiled

Vera. "Good-by, Kennard. I like a brave man, and if I am sending you beyond the gates of doom, I shall pray for your safety."

The sorceress straightened in her saddle and gazed at the man in the trail.

"Are you still mounted?" she suddenly asked.

"I am."

"Don't show your horse in Red Eye. It will give you away."

"Trust that to me."

Vera the Viper took up the lines and rode away. She knew she was watched by the man left behind but she did not look back.

"There goes a strange woman, almost as great a mystery as Queen Moro," said the detective gazing after her. "I am confident that she knows the gold secret, and I am very sure that she will never divulge it. She is right. I have to get it from Gilbert, and he is in danger. Who menaces him? Aha! I must find that out at Red Eye."

The man who rode down the mountain road a few minutes afterward was burly of figure and well mounted. He did not look like Keen Kennard with his full black beard, real dark hat and somewhat dingy costume, but he was no other person than the Shasta Sleuth-hound on his way to the mountain camp.

Vera had turned him back, and he could not but think that he was going to help the person who had tried to choke him to death.

"I'll stand by the boy," he said with determination. "Woe to the man who harms him!"

A few hours' ride took him to a spot near the camp. He dismounted and found a secure place for his horse then walked boldly forward and with the courage of a lion strode into Red Eye where he knew discovery by its alcalde meant death.

The camp for once was still, and the detective was inclined to believe that it was deserted by its inhabitants.

He saw the phantom-like cabins beneath the stars, but all lights were out. Was he the only living person in Red Eye?

At his heels at that very moment crept a man who had seen him enter the camp. The Red Eye pard had drawn his boots, and his steps sent forth no sound.

"What in thunder fetches Duncan back?" muttered Keen Kennard's trailer. "Has he lost Floss somewhar in ther mountains. I'll tell 'im that he comes ter ther wrong place when he comes ter Red Eye. Yes, that man is Duncan."

The tracker quickened his gait, and reached the man moving down the street.

"Duncan, isn't this a bad place for you under ther circumstances?" he suddenly said.

The man from Shasta stopped and looked down into the speaker's face.

"Jehosaphat! I thought you war Duncan!" cried the man, shrinking away. "I see ye ar' not that pard now, neither ar' yer Dagger Johnny. Who ar' yer, anyhow?—ther galoot from Shasta?"

Already the hands of the discovered detective had clutched the startled rough, and a pair of mad eyes were glaring at him.

"It makes no difference who I am!" he grated.

"But a good deal ter Red Eye, mebbe," was the answer. "See hyer, pard. Ye'd better go an' show yerself ter Dropshot. He ain't in the best ov humor. We had a time with Gilbert ther fool ter-night, an' ther result doesn't set well on our stomachs."

"What has happened?"

"That's nothin' ter you," said the man sullenly.

"Tell me!"

The detective's hands tightened on the fellow's arms; his eyes seemed to take on a menace.

"Thar war blood," said the man sententiously. "Gilbert shot one ov ther boys."

"You maddened him."

"Kinder so. Dropshot told him that this monkey business had ter quit. Red Eye war ov ther same opinion. That's all. You're not a Red Eye pard. Excuse me. You look like ther Shasta man in ther eyes."

Keen Kennard felt a thrill pass along his bones. Accusation would come next.

"This camp is almighty quiet for the tragedy you mention," he said.

"What's ther use ov losin' sleep over it? It ar' Red Eye ag'in' a boy; that's nothin'! Aha! I see you, now," and the man leaned forward and looked searchingly into the detective's face. "You ar' Keen Kennard, sure enough! I kin see it in spite ov yer beard. You had better git out o' Red Eye."

"Not until I choose to go. What is your name?"

"California Charley."

"What if Dropshot should face us now?—what would you do?"

"Ter be honest, I should denounce yer," was the answer.

"You could swear ter my identity?"

"I could."

"But would you do it?"

"Yes!"

The detective's lips met firmly when the last reply was spoken.

He dropped one hand and drew a revolver.

"I am not going to have any fool game hyer," he said, looking into California Charley's face.

"Open your head, and I will send you to your grave without brains! Come with me."

Unable to utter a word from astonishment, the Red Eye pard followed the man from Shasta. The two moved toward the side of the camp at which Keen Kennard had entered. The cabins were passed one by one.

At last the detective halted before one of the silent shanties.

"You know this cabin?" he said, looking at California Charley who had started.

"I ought ter."

"It is the death pit of Red Eye," and Kennard sent the door open with a kick. "You are going into it," he went on with merciless firmness. "I can't afford to leave your tongue loose in Red Eye."

"For God's sake keep me out o' thar!" cried the sport, in pleading tones. "Any death but ther one in—thar."

"Keep you out? Not for all California, old fellow. I know my duty. Go in!"

"Never! May my feet wither if I do."

"Then I'll throw you in!"

The next moment the man from Shasta almost lifted California Charley from the ground and pitched him headlong into the death-trap!

CHAPTER XXI.

IN CABIN NUMBER FOUR.

"So much for Vera's information!" ejaculated Keen Kennard, as he closed the door of the cabin and turned away leaving California Charley to his terrible fate. "That man knew me on sight. Can it be that I wear a mask so easily penetrated? What will Dropshot Bluff, the boss of this place, do when I encounter him? I am here to rescue Gilbert who is in danger, as the sorceress says. California Charley's story confirms hers. They tried to force the boy's secret from him, and he showed his teeth; he killed one of the pards of Red Eye. I must find the young gold bug."

Nobody seems to have witnessed the recognition, and the doom that swiftly followed. Was California Charley the only Red Eye pard abroad when the Shasta detective came into camp? If he was, Keen Kennard had been fortunate in finding him so soon.

The gold-hunter directed his steps toward Gilbert Golden's cabin. He hardly expected to find the boy there after what the doomed rough had told him, but he knew not where to look first if not there.

He found the door of the cabin slightly ajar, and the next moment he stood half-way inside, trying to pierce the gloom ahead, while he listened for a sound that would tell him that Gilbert was at home.

"He doesn't seem to be here," said Kennard, in audible tones at last. "If he shot a man he would never be left in his own cabin under guard."

But to make certain of the boy's absence the man from Shasta stepped inside, closed the door and struck a match.

All at once an ejaculation of surprise escaped him.

"They caught him here. Gilbert must have retreated to his cabin after the shooting. He did not yield without a struggle. I doubt whether there is a chance of finding the boy alive."

The match shaded by his hand showed him the cabin's furniture in topsy-turvy condition. The stool and table were overturned, the latter being in a wrecked condition, and there were not wanting more evidences of a desperate struggle with desperate men.

Here and there were dark spots on the floor which told the detective that blood had been shed, and the longer he looked, the more he became convinced that the pards of Red Eye had dealt summarily with the lost man of Gold Gorge.

He had come too late to rescue Gilbert!

The match went out and the detective stood in the darkness awhile to collect his thoughts.

"Mebbe he went ahead of California Charley!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Heavens! if they have treated the boy thus, thar's no telling what I'll do before I leave this camp."

He stood once more in the starlight, with the door of Gilbert's cabin shut behind him. He looked up and down Red Eye's one street, but saw nothing.

A strange curiosity impelled him toward the famous "fourth cabin," and a few moments later he stood in front of it again.

"California Charley has found bottom ere this," said Keen Kennard. "He has reached the three men he told me about just before I pitched him into the place."

He opened the door and stepped carefully inside, then he struck a light and looked around. For a moment he saw nothing but a cabin-floor entirely devoid of furniture of any kind, but at last he saw an opening in the middle.

"The trap!" he said. "It is too big for California Charley to miss."

Keen Kennard now felt his way inch by inch over the floor, which appeared sound for some distance. The several matches bunched in his hand showed him the way, and his hand not thus employed felt the planks inch by inch.

He reached the trap in this manner. It consisted of a square board which swung downward, and was arranged in such a manner that any object falling upon it would be hurled into the dark depths below.

It was a terrible trap, and Keen Kennard pushed the swinging board downward until he could look into the darkness of the abyss. A cold, damp smell came up; he could see nothing.

"If Gilbert is down there, rescue is not to be thought of," he said. "The gold secret has perished with the boy."

He was about to fling his flickering light into the pit when a rope caught his eye. It led into the pit itself at one corner of the trap-door, and following it up, the Shasta Sleuth saw it fastened to a heavy iron staple in the log near the floor.

The rope was stretched tight as if something heavy dangled from the end hanging down the opening. Keen Kennard crawled over to it and tried to draw it up, but could not move it without a great effort.

"Hang me! if I'm not goin' to see what's at the end of this cord!" exclaimed the detective. "Maybe I've struck the treasure-box of Red Eye Bar. Heavens! what if I find the lost Ophir here?"

As the floor up to the very edge of the trap was solid, Kennard ventured forward and worked without fear. He swung the trap-door back and struck some more matches.

Then he tore some lining from his jacket and set it on fire.

"I'll send a searcher down the shaft," he said, leaning over the pit with the fabric blazing in his hand, and the next moment he dropped it down.

Like a fiery ball the mass fell over and over in its descent, revealing to the Shasta Sleuth a narrow and almost circular shaft, about eight feet across. He kept his eyes fixed on the tightened rope, which was shown by the fire-ball, and looked eagerly for the end.

"Merciful God!" suddenly exclaimed the man, "As I live, there is a human being at the end of the cord. Is it Gilbert?"

He saw this startling object but for a moment, for the light had passed it and was flying down the chasm.

"I feel like shooting my way out of this devil's den!" the detective went on, as he rose and found himself in darkness again. "This is the revenge of Red Eye. They first corner Gilbert and tantalize him until in his rage he kills one of their number, when, at the command of Dropshot Bluff, no doubt, he is hanged in this terrible pit. I don't regret having thrown California Charley down here. I wish I could send the balance after him."

Keen Kennard was not absolutely certain that the person suspended in the pit was Gilbert; but the story of the killing told by California Charley led him to believe that it was.

He stood a few moments longer in the darkness of the cabin, and then stooped and grasped the rope.

"By the eternal! if it is Gilbert, I will know it," he cried. "If the rope encircles his neck, he is dead, of course; then I will make the men of Red Eye face their victim before I leave."

Keen Kennard was a Hercules in strength, and bracing himself as firmly as he could, he pulled away with all his might hand over hand, and soon found that he was raising the rope inch by inch.

"I'll get to him finally," panted the persevering gold detective, as he tugged away without a moment's rest. "This is the first hanged man I ever pulled up; I've cut 'em down before."

Slowly through the darkness rose the person at the end of the rope.

The man from Shasta did not relax his efforts until he lifted the object clear of the trap and laid it upon the solid floor near the edge.

"At last!" he exclaimed, joyously. "I seldom fail to accomplish what I undertake, and having pulled Red Eye's victim out of his tomb, I'll take a look at him."

The mountain detective stooped and struck another match; then holding it over the pinioned body he had drawn out of the pit, he gazed down into the face.

"Heavens! Gilbert—as I expected!" parted his lips in accents of undisguised horror, while his eyes suddenly flashed. "For this infernal work somebody will have to suffer before mornin'. I didn't promise Queen Moro that I wouldn't kill anybody when I left Sacramento at her bidding. My oath was to find Gilbert and the lost Ophir. I've found the boy; the mine will come after awhile."

Keen Kennard's lips compressed while he looked at the youth lying on the board before him. The detective was *thinking* vengeance.

All at once he observed that the rope did not encircle Gilbert's neck, but that it passed around his body and was drawn up under his arms.

"Maybe the boy ain't dead!" he suddenly cried, and his hand flew to the youth's pulse.

"Life, by Jupiter!" he cried. "I will yet hear the secret of Ophir from your lips, Gilbert, and we will be pards after all even though you did choke me in the trail. But you were mad then."

The next instant the knife of the detective had

severed the rope that encircled the youth, and he went to the door and looked out.

It seemed almost incredible that his adventure should be carried so far without discovery yet such appeared to be the case for the stars were shining over quiet Red Eye and his keen eyes did not see a single figure.

The fourth cabin with the limited space between trap and wall was no place to bring about the restoration of Gilbert. That had to be accomplished elsewhere.

Keen Kennard went back and lifted the youth from the floor.

"I'll bring him back to life among the mountains," he said, "and there we will debate what to do. I am pretty sure that Red Eye will hear from us for this infernal suspension in the shaft. Maybe I'll give Gilbert a revolver and tell him to come back here and use it."

The man lying limp and inanimate in the arms of the mountain detective was no mean burden, but Kennard reached the dark shadows of the cabins in safety.

Step by step with every sense on the alert he moved toward the mountain saying to himself with a smile:

"I can't run with this load. If discovered, I've got to drop it and shoot my way clear to my horse!"

These words were uttered with that cool determination characteristic of the Shasta sport and his look gave them stern emphasis.

He passed the first cabin without accident, but the fates seemed at war with the cool head.

"Halt and drop yer load!" suddenly rung out a voice, and the next instant the door of the second shanty was flung wide and three men leaped out.

The Shasta Sleuth complied with a part of the command. He lowered Gilbert to the ground, but deliberately took position over him and whipped out two revolvers in the twinkling of an eye.

"We need no introduction," he said to the trio who had recoiled at his sudden action.

"The man who lifts a hand or advances a step will pass the portals of eternity!"

"By Jove! he's got ther boy!" said one, and then he raised his voice in a wild yell which he supplemented with the cry of, "Red Eye ter ther rescue!"

The shout penetrating the camp in every direction, produced the effect intended.

Men came forward singly and in pairs until, in the light of several lamps, the man from Shasta stood at bay over the body of Gilbert Golden, the keeper of the gold secret.

If California Charley had recognized him, he seemed to fare better with the men who now confronted him. They leaned forward with intense curiosity traceable on their faces and stared at Keen Kennard as if he were a citizen of the lower regions.

Erect, and directly over Gilbert, stood this cool hunter, with a revolver clutched in each hand, and with his eyes fastened on the crowd.

"We don't know yer, but thet makes no difference," said one. "You hev entered Red Eye an' stolen ther young galoot who shot Lightnin' Lige. Thet's enough. I am Dropshot Bluff. I am ther alcalde of Red Eye Bar."

Kennard had already seen the boss of the mountain camp, and the eyes of the two men met when the big alcalde finished.

"Ther boy at yer feet b'longs ter ther avengers ov Red Eye," Dropshot Bluff went on. "Our law is a life for a life. It is mountain law, as yer know. Stand back an' let us retake ther young shooter, or—"

"Or what, gentlemen?" asked the detective, with a faint smile.

"You ought ter know, with ther lay-out before yer!" cried the alcalde. "Yer' no fresh from ther cities. Stan' back an' give us our own!"

"Not to-night; some other eve," was the cool answer, and then the detective resumed with biting sternness: "Gentlemen, where I am best known I am called Keen Kennard, and the man who lifts a hand will drop dead in his tracks. Business is business. I don't intend to toss this boy back into your tiger claws!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"ON THER MEND."

It would be needless to state that the effect of the gold detective's words were electrical.

This man with the black beard, Keen Kennard, of Shasta?

The pards of Red Eye showed their astonishment in their looks, and Dropshot Bluff was no less amazed than his companions.

The revolvers of the cool man from the North grinned in their faces, and the bronze fingers at the triggers were ready to carry out his sternly-spoken threat.

"I don't want blood, gentlemen," went on Kennard, with a cutting emphasis on the last word. "Don't force me to shed it. I want this man, though," and he threw a swift glance to the body at his feet. "Yes, I lifted him from the depths of cabin number four. It was the work of devils that lowered him into the pit."

"He shot Lightnin' Lige," growled half a dozen men in chorus.

"Not until he had been provoked to shed

blood," was the reply. "You sentenced him to the most horrible of deaths—starvation in mid-air, and in the blackness of that death-pit. By-an'-by, perhaps, you would have mercifully cut the rope."

A grim smile appeared at the corners of the alcalde's mouth.

"Perhaps," he echoed as grimly, and then he went on looking over the outstretched revolvers of the Shasta Sleuth. "You reached him afore life could leave 'im. You want ter take him from Red Eye."

"I want to, an' I will!" said the cool head. "Gentlemen, throw up your right hands an' swear that you will make no move toward Kennard of Shasta for thirty minutes. This is man against man. I have dropped the role of Magic Merle. From this hour I play my hand as Kennard from the North. Up with your right hands. I want the oath from each one of you. No foolishness now, pardos of Red Eye!"

The men glanced at Dropshot Bluff who was grating his teeth behind a pair of tightly drawn lips.

They all saw that the man who confronted them had the dead drop on the crowd, and they felt that he would not hesitate to open his batteries if the oath was not taken.

It was a moment of suspense. What would the alcalde do?

"It's only for thirty minutes!—what is that?" muttered Dropshot Bluff. "I kin then turn my human wolves loose upon him, an' ther mountains won't hide him long. He may restore Gilbert but that may be ter our advantage. We'll take ther oath."

The next moment his eyes made a sign to his followers, and the right hand of every man was was lifted in mid-air.

"For thirty minutes only, boys," said the alcalde. "At ther end ov thet time we kin get even for this robbery an' ther forced oath."

"Yes; you can turn on Kennard then," said the detective with a smile.

"Then we all swear ter give yer thirty minutes ther start for thet's what it amounts ter," the alcalde answered, and a moment later the hands fell.

Keen Kennard uttered no thanks; his eyes looked the triumph he had achieved over the desperate crowd, and quietly putting up his revolvers, he stooped and lifted Gilbert once more.

The pardos of Red Eye looked daggers at the Shasta Sleuth and more than one hand clutched the butt of a six-shooter, but not one was raised against him as he swung the youth to his shoulder and stepped back.

"Cool as ice, an' as desperate as despair!" said Dropshot Bluff when he saw Keen Kennard walking off once more with his inanimate burden; "at ther end ov thirty minutes we will throw ourselves upon his trail. Thar goes ther boy what shot Lige, an' ther keeper ov ther bonanza secret, an' ther man who carries him off is ther greatest enemy Red Eye has to-night. Stan' whar ye ar'! Thirty minutes ain't long."

In the glare of the lamps stood the pardos of Red Eye waiting for the truce to expire.

They could not see Keen Kennard walking toward his horse. He had discarded the false beard and was the smooth-faced detective once more.

"Back again!" he exclaimed when he reached the steed that recognized him. "It was a close call back thar, but I got the drop on ther crowd. A man will take any kind of oath with a revolver grinning in his face. Thet has been my experience anyhow, and the desperadoes of Red Eye are no exception."

He looked down into Gilbert's face and saw the eyes open and fixed upon him.

The boy was himself once more.

"If your call was a close one, what must mine have been?" asked Gilbert in faint tones. "They hung me down that infamous pit to die there of slow starvation. A short time before you came, Keen Kennard, something struck me and passed on down."

"That was California Charley," said the detective with a smile.

A shudder passed over the youth's frame, as he thought of the horrible fate of the Red Eye pard, and his hand crept to Kennard's wrist and fastened there.

"I shall not be long on your hands," he went on. "I want to go back to Red Eye. I want you to arm me, I have no weapons now. I want to face those devils just for one minute!"

The detective understood and laughed.

"If you go back it will not be alone," he answered. "But we are not going to talk of revenge now. We will soon be the hunted instead of the hunters. If I am not mistaken, we will have Red Eye at our backs howling for blood like a pack of Californy wolves."

"There is just where I want them, so I can turn on the beasts!" cried Gilbert. "If you don't want to fight Red Eye, Kennard, I shall not insist. Give me the weapons—that is all."

The detective's horse was now carrying "double" over the mountain trail, and the thirty minutes had about expired.

Suddenly Gilbert exclaimed:

"Floss! In heaven's name have we left her behind with the pardos of Red Eye?"

"Don't let her situation disturb you," was the reply.

"What if they should turn on her in their rage? I did not see her during the fight in camp. She did not come to me at my brief and infamous trial. She came to Red Eye in an old wagon. I saw her once. Kennard, give me a revolver and let me go back to Floss."

"No," said the man from Shasta firmly. "The hand of Dropshot Bluff will not touch the girl."

"Is she not at Red Eye?"

"She is not there."

"Thank Heaven!"

Gilbert did not inquire where Floss was, and Kennard did not tell him that Vera had told him that she had gone off with Duncan one of the desperadoes of the bar.

For some minutes longer the horse continued over the mountain trail at a good pace which constantly increased the distance between his riders and the camp.

"How did they come at you?" asked Kennard breaking the silence at last.

"Dropshot Bluff came alone like he always does," was the reply. "I expected no visit. I can not tell you how I got back to Red Eye. I only know that I went away with the strange woman called Queen Moro. I must have been mad again in the mountains, and with the fit on I wandered back to camp. Well, Dropshot Bluff came alone, as I was telling you. His first words were about the gold secret which it is believed I alone possess. It had all passed from my head. I could not recollect anything about it. He badgered and abused me in return, accused me of willfully keeping the secret from Red Eye, and said that the time had come for business. He went away to be gone hardly five minutes when he came back with half of the camp behind him. The secret was demanded by the whole set with oaths and insult. I was pounced upon and dragged to the table where a piece of chalk was put in my hand, and I was told to draw the diagram of the route to Ophir or be shot to pieces—all in ten minutes."

"In vain did I tell the villains that I was incapable of complying. I told them that the secret came and went by turns, as it does; but they hooted my word and covered me with their revolvers. In my despair I racked my brains till my head seemed ready to burst with pain. I tried to divulge the secret. I would have flung it before them, glad to rid myself of the terrible thing that has caused me such misery, but I could not grasp it. In the despair which increased I threw the chalk upon the table. A howl of rage went up. I saw the revolvers thrust across the boards into my face. It was the most terrible moment of my life. On every side the infuriated men of Red Eye were demanding the gold secret, or death. I had to do something. Suddenly a pistol in a certain belt caught my eye. I darted forward and jerked it out. The next moment it flashed in the faces of the Red Eye pardos. I heard a shot, a yell of pain and a dozen hands seemed to close on my throat."

"The wonder is that I was not shot to pieces," continued Gilbert. "May I never pass through such scenes again! I was overpowered after making all the struggle I could, and hurried before a tribunal composed of the very men who had confronted me. I was told that my shot had taken the life of Lightning Lige one of the worst men at the bar, and the law of the sierra is blood for blood."

"Dropshot Bluff proposed the doom to which I was subjected. The trail was a farce. I was condemned before the tribunal met. I was pinioned and lowered into the shaft where you found me. Starvation in mid-air was to be my fate; but insensibility blotted out my thoughts in the horrid pit. I owe you life, Keen Kennard. We are more than pardos from this moment. We are friends!"

The man from Shasta smiled on the youth as he said:

"Please excuse me from close calls like yours. It is a good thing that you could not give the gold dogs the map. But what do you really think of it? I sometimes think, Gilbert, that the bonanza has no real existence."

"A myth eh?" cried the youth.

"Something of that kind."

"It is tangible. I know it!" was the quick exclamation. "I saw its nuggets once myself when Max Mogalle, Floss's father, and I were the last survivors of the gold-hunters. It is a sight. I have seen it in dreams a hundred times since."

"But you can't see it now?" asked Keen Kennard eagerly.

"No, not now," answered Gilbert. "This is one of my forgetful nights. You will take me some time at the right moment, Kennard. I want to give you the map. No! I want to lead you to the very gates of that wonderful gold paradise. I am going to do it, only I can't recall the route now."

"Try," said the detective.

Gilbert relapsed into a condition of deep mental silence and the horse bore them several miles before another word was spoken.

"It is useless. I cannot!" suddenly said the boy, lifting his head. "But what do you think,

Kennard? I must have been in a strange trance just now. I saw Floss as plainly as when I noticed her in Red Eye several nights ago. She was mounted but was not alone. Beside her rode the masked mystery of Sacramento—that woman who hates her and all her kin. My God! Floss has fallen back into her hands. I saw it all as plainly as though they were now riding by us."

A wild expression was in the boy's eyes while he spoke; it gave the detective fears of approaching insanity.

"Never mind," he said. "If Floss is in Queen Moro's hands, she shall be delivered. I promise you this, Gilbert."

"Thanks, Kennard, and I will give you the gold secret."

The wild look suddenly vanished, and Gilbert was himself again while the Shasta Sleuth congratulated himself that the crisis had passed.

"Hark! hear the noise ahead," and Gilbert's hand clutched the detective's arm. "Can it be that the wolves of Red Eye are in our front?"

"If they are anywhere they are behind us. What did you hear?"

"A man's voice. There!"

Keen Kennard leaned forward and listened.

"Banished from Red Eye! ho, ho, ho!" said a harsh voice. "I laughed in their faces when Dropshot spoke ther decree, an' I told 'em thet ef my wounds healed they'd hear from this sierra bombshell. I'm on ther mend, thank fortune. A daisy an' a tiger rolled inter one is Dagger Johnny!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"D. B."

FOR some time after hearing the voice which was unmistakably that of Dagger Johnny the banished pard, Keen Kennard and Gilbert did not move from the spot where they had halted.

They expected to see the Red Eye pard appear in the trail, but he did not show up, and his voice died away and finally ceased.

"I don't care about meeting him," said Kennard. "If he wants to strike Red Eye for banishing him, let him do it. It is wolf against wolf, Gilbert, and in hitting his foes, he will hit yours."

The possessor of the gold secret smiled.

"I'll never ask him to do that, Kennard. I want nobody to take vengeance for me," he said. "But do you know there is one thing I cannot get rid of?"

"What is that?"

The singular sight I saw while I was trying to recall the gold map awhile ago for you—Floss riding alongside Queen Moro, her prisoner once more."

"I don't believe in such visions. I never took stock in such things," the Shasta Sleuth answered in a cheerful tone. "Dismiss it, Gilbert. When we find the girl she will not be in that woman's hands."

"I can't get it out of my head," persisted Gilbert.

"If she has fallen into Queen Moro's hands what has become of Duncan?" murmured Kennard. "Vera says the two left Red Eye together. But pshaw! Gilbert saw his fears assume shape—that's all."

At that very moment two horses were moving along side by side, and upon each sat a representative of the tender sex.

The mountain was wild and desolate at that place, and the trail was sprinkled thickly with the cones of the pine.

Gilbert Golden would have uttered a strange cry if he could have seen the two riders of the slowly-moving steeds.

One of the females wore a black mask that reached to her mouth, and from behind a pair of glittering eyes watched the young and beautiful rider of the other horse.

"You didn't think that I would turn up here when you left Sacramento to find Gilbert by any means?" said the masked woman, with a low laugh that was full of triumph. "That old wagon which you bought in the gold camp took you safely into Red Eye, Floss; but I was not far behind you. My man failed me. Keen Kennard has disregarded the oath he took in the city. He has not found the lost Ophir, and I had to hunt it myself. I could kill this man from Shasta," and her voice sunk to a hiss. "I trusted him too far, and I could lean over and choke you, my bird."

Floss drew back with a shudder and saw the eyes of the masked huntress almost touch her cheek.

"Yes," said the girl. "You hate me and all my kin. You have told me this a hundred times, but yet you never told me why."

Queen Moro laughed scornfully and straightened again.

"Why should I?" she continued, laughing again. "It would be a story of wrong—of persecution—if I did. Your father—"

Floss interrupted her with a singular cry.

"That is further than you have ever gone before!" she cried. "Where is my father? Ah! I know—dead somewhere on the trail to the lost gold mine!"

"Dead, as he should be!" said Queen Moro, bitterly. "He saves me one blow. As for you,

my bird, I ought to throw my hand at your throat. I hate you and all your kin!"

With the last word Queen Moro reined in her steed and glared at the girl with all the intensity of hatred.

"Run off with Duncan, did you?" she suddenly cried.

"No. I went with him. He promised to find—"

"Gilbert, eh? Always Gilbert! I wouldn't mind finding the boy myself. I would make him talk. He should show me the route to the lost Ophir. I would draw from him his secret for the second time. I had it once, but the man called Dagger Johnny got possession of it after a fight which must eventually cost him his life."

"If it is 'always Gilbert' with me," smiled Floss, "it is 'always the lost mine' with you."

"Yes! I want its wealth!" exclaimed the woman. "Without it I cannot carry out the revenge I have planned. I know the failings of some men. By the eternal heavens! girl, I go back to Frisco armed with a power that will crush, and then kill. The sun shall never see my face. I wouldn't show it to you for the earth."

Floss made no reply, though a chill swept through her frame. She thought of the time when she caught a glimpse of that hidden face, as we have heard her relate to the big alcalde of Red Eye. If Queen Moro had raised her mask there she would have turned away without a glance.

She did not want to see that face again.

The horses moved on, continuing their slow walk down the trail. More than once Queen Moro would turn and look fiercely at the young girl at her side.

"She looks like him, and she ought to; she is his kin," the woman muttered. "What a revenge it would be to take her to Frisco and throw her at his feet with a dagger in her heart! His brother's child, too! Oh! you viper spawn! I could dagger you where you are. Hark!"

She uttered the last word aloud.

"A horse is coming toward us, and horses do not run these trails without a rider."

The next moment the masked mystery clutched Floss's bridle-rein, and the two steeds were guided to the very edge of the trail where the ghostly pines rendered the spot quite dark.

"One word, one sign at the peril of your life!" Queen Moro went on, seizing the girl's arm and drawing a slender-bladed dagger. "The person who comes may be your friend; certain it is he will be my foe. Look me in the eye and hold your tongue. If the horses give us away, I will drive this bit of steel to your heart!"

Floss saw the blade poised above her breast, and gripped firmly by the hand that held it there, and while she looked she heard the hoof-beats of the horse as yet unseen.

"You know what to do—so beware!" the mystery went on. "I am one of those people who work for one thing—vengeance!"

The horse came on amid the strange silence that filled the spot occupied by the girl and her persecutor.

Floss's curiosity almost made her lean forward despite the menace of eye and dagger. Who would the horseman be?

Slowly a figure appeared in the trail, and the girl saw evolved from the semi-darkness a horse and his rider.

The eyes of Queen Moro seemed to glisten anew, but Floss noticed that the dagger remained stationary, as if the mystery possessed the power of watching two objects at once.

The horses stood like statues in the shadows of the pines. Queen Moro had told Floss that if one of them neighed the dagger would fall, and the girl did not doubt that she would keep her word.

"Heavens! it is a woman!" almost slipped between the girl's lips, and she glanced at the masked avenger to see what she thought of the discovery.

"My enemy, as I thought," she heard Queen Moro mutter. "If she sees us, Floss, you get the full benefit of my steel."

Twenty feet only separated the two parties, and the woman who had appeared when not expected passed on unconscious of the proximity of Floss and her foe.

"That woman is the banished sorceress of Red Eye. It is Vera the Viper," said Queen Moro, addressing Floss, whose eyes were following the woman. "She came from Utah to strike two men. One of them she has killed; now she wants the blood of the other. I respect a woman who can hunt the blood of the men who made her more than exile. I had that person before my revolver once, but I could not kill her. I broke my oath and let her live; but before she should look into your face here, girl, as I have told you already, I would dagger you. Let her go. She will see somebody if she rides forward long enough, and she may know that I am not here to play."

Slowly Vera the sorceress vanished from the sight of the watching pair, and Queen Moro suddenly touched the girl's arm.

"You obeyed me well, and our horses kept silent for your sake," she said, with a light laugh. "It was a close call, as they say among the

roughs of the sierra. I would like to follow Vera. She has turned her face toward Red Eye. I wonder whether she is going back to pay her respects to Dropshot Bluff. If she does, my girl, there will soon be another mountain grave where Grim George lies. I don't want the morning to find us here. Come; we are off."

Once more the horses moved on, and Vera, who by the merest chance had missed Queen Moro and her prisoner, kept down the trail, which, if followed in all its windings, would carry her close to Red Eye.

She rode over the same ground lately traversed by the masked mystery and Floss, and at the end of several miles her steed whirled suddenly and almost unhorsed her.

"What is it, Pluto?" she cried, leaning forward. "Nothing frightens you but a snake and a corpse. Heavens! a corpse it is!"

The next moment Vera was on the ground, and while her steed planted himself firmly in the trail and refused to move another step, she went forward.

Stretched across the trail in the brilliant starlight lay the body of a stalwart man, clothed in the rough garments of the mountains, and with his stiffened arms outstretched.

Eager to see, Vera bent down until her face almost touched the face of the dead.

"Duncan!" she suddenly exclaimed, "Duncan, the man who took the girl Floss from Red Eye. Where is Floss?"

She could not tell how long the man in the trail had been dead.

"He was not shot in the face," she said. "Perhaps he was hanged, and thrown in this position across the trail. No! here is the instrument of death—a knife broken off in his bosom."

Just then the woman's eyes caught sight of the object standing an inch above Duncan's breast—the blade of a bowie broken off at the hilt.

It seemed to pin the corpse to the ground.

"I know the knives of Red Eye Bar," she said. "If Duncan died at the hand of one of his former pards, this blade will say so, for at my suggestion, when I played sorceress at Red Eye, each man stamped his initials on the blade of his bowie. I know them all."

She laid hold of the deeply-buried blade, and to her surprise found that it was easily pulled from the death-wound it had inflicted.

"You needn't wipe ther blood off ter see whose initials ar' thar," suddenly said a deep voice behind the sorceress. "I did thet myself awhile ago, an' I kin enlighten yer."

"You?" cried Vera, springing up and confronting the speaker.

"Bet yer boots I kin, Vera. I looked at thet bowie not twenty minutes ago, an' saw on it ther letters 'D. B.'"

"Dropshot Bluff!" cried Vera.

"Thet's ther man who gave it ter Duncan!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MERCILESS CROWD.

THE sorceress of Red Eye stood in the starlight, and glanced from the man before her to the hiltless dagger in her hand.

"So this is the alcalde's work? He followed Duncan, eh?"

"I jedge so. Nobody but ther owner ever carried that bowie, yer know."

"What became of Floss? She went off with Duncan."

"I don't pretend ter know everything," was the answer, accompanied by a faint smile. "I tried ter find out too much for my own good. All I know about Duncan is thet I found him dead thar awhile ago, hunted down by Dropshot an' pards, mebbe. They want this chick under ther blood laws ov Red Eye. Behold in me ther exile ov ther Bar."

The speaker straightened himself before Vera and laughed.

"I never suspected why you played sorceress so long, until arter we found Grim George dead," he went on. "George war Dropshot's pard in Mormondom. Why did you begin on him, ther least ov ther two, Vera?"

"Because I want the greatest villain to be the last one," was the quick reply. "I want him to know that the avenger is on his track. All his pards shall desert him before his time comes. He has kept them together by the love of gold; they have all sworn to find the lost bonanza. It has become the life-hunt of the pards of Red Eye. They have watched Gilbert for years, his dreams have been interrupted by their footsteps, they have trailed him in his rambles, but so far all in vain. What would they say if I would tell them that I could lead them to Ophir?"

"Heavens! kin yer do that, Vera," exclaimed the man, almost throwing himself forward.

"Did I say I could?" laughed the sorceress.

"Not exactly, but I inferred—"

"You must not infer so much, Dagger Johnny," continued Vera, laughing still. "I must not forget that I am addressing one of Dropshot Bluff's pards—"

"An' his bitter foe!" interrupted the rough who was our old acquaintance, Dagger Johnny. "I could clap a pistol to his head an' send him ter Grim George!"

"Which I would not advise you to do for your own good," said Vera.

"He banished me!"

"No difference."

"He was mad because his picked jury didn't hev me shot on ther spot."

"Yet, you must not kill that man."

"Why not?"

"Because I am the avenger of the 10th of July."

"That settles it, I suppose. When ar' yer goin' ter strike?"

"When his hopes have been raised to the highest pitch—when he almost feels the gold of Ophir in his hands."

"I call that risky work. What ef you should fail then?"

"But I shall not," said Vera, with resolution. "You may hate Dropshot Bluff with all your heart, Dagger Johnny—you may be willing to shoot him on sight—"

"By Jupiter! I am!"

"You may have forgotten your old oaths of pardship taken in his presence, but I cannot forget that you belong to Red Eye Bar. I will tell you nothing!"

"Then I kin go on an' do as I please."

"With the alcalde?"

"Mebbe so."

The next moment Vera the Viper darted forward and her hand closed on the rough's right arm.

"If you dare!" she said, sternly. "Touch Dropshot Bluff to carry out your own revenge, and as sure as there's a God above us, Dagger Johnny, the stars will see you lying across a trail like Duncan there! I have no band to back me. I want none. The Gentile League was disbanded long ago. I am the only member who stuck to the trail. I will not leave it till the end has been reached. I say for the last time, 'Touch Dropshot Bluff if you dare!' Kill all his pards, if you wish, but spare that prince of demons for me."

There was a look in Vera's eyes that sent a chill through Dagger Johnny's frame.

"She played ther lamb in Red Eye, but she's a tigress hyer," he muttered. "I guess I'd better not turn my battery on ther alcalde while she hunts him."

The hand fell from his arm and Vera stepped back.

"Duncan can keep the dagger," she said, throwing the hiltless blade upon the dead man in the trail. "Where are you going, Johnny?"

"Hang me if I know for certain. Yer don't want a pard, Vera?"

"In this game? no! And if I did, I wouldn't select a man connected with Red Eye!"

"Jehu! thet's plain English! I hope you'll find Dropshot, an' when you do strike remember ther man he exiled."

"I remember only the 10th of July. Guard this corpse or go away, as you please. Don't cross my path."

The next minute the sorceress was leading her horse down the trail, and Dagger Johnny was gazing after her with the air of a man lost in astonishment.

"If they are all away from Red Eye why not post the lure?" she suddenly exclaimed, reining in her steed. "They will come back, and a sight of it will set them wild. I will do it. Tonight yet I will set the trap for the gold dogs of the sierra."

She rode forward again and did not stop until she reached the scene of so much of our romance—Red Eye Bar.

"I'll draw it in his own cabin. I will leave it there for him," she said, as she approached the quarters of the alcalde.

In the eyes of the huntress there always gleamed the light of vengeance, and having lit Dropshot's lamp she seated herself at the little table and began to draw a singular diagram on a small sheet of paper which she took from her bosom.

She presented a strange tableau in the light of the solitary lamp, as the sole occupant of the rough cabin. The silence was that of the grave, and the pencil of the avenger made no noise as it moved back and forth over the paper.

What a sight for the alcalde's eyes if he should return! What a splendid chance to avenge the blood of Grim George buried on the mountain!

Vera did not pause until she had completed the map to her satisfaction.

Then, beneath it she wrote two lines of six words each.

"Here is the gold map, Dropshot, now lead your men to Ophir."

The diagram was left on the table, and the sorceress of Red Eye turned away with a look of triumph.

"When he clutches this he will not carry out my command. I know the man called Dropshot Bluff," she said. "He will seek the trail alone. He will turn from his pards. Now for the rest of the play."

Five minutes later Vera sat at a table in another cabin, and when she arose she had written the following upon its surface in letters of chalk.

"MEN OF RED EYE:—Watch the man whom you call leader. He knows more about the location of the lost Ophir than you dream he does. To you he is Dropshot the alcalde; in Mormondom a few years ago he was Dave Dastard, the infamous elder!"

"I guess I've done enough for to-night!" laughed Vera. "I don't see anything of Keen Kennard whom I sent back here to help Gilbert, and the boy's cabin is empty. I could burn out this mountain nest and I would if it were not for the lure and the foil I have left here. The alcalde will come back to Red Eye; he will find the map; his pards will see the other paper. I would like to witness the scene that will follow."

A minute later Vera was moving down the deserted street followed by her horse whose bridle rein she held.

All at once the animal stopped and lifted his head.

"What is it now, Pluto? Have the roughs of Red Eye come back already?"

A loud laugh that rent the night fell suddenly upon the woman's ears and forced her into the shadow thrown by her steed.

"If they catch me there will be no Queen Moro to interfere this time," she muttered and then as she drew a revolver and silently cocked it she hissed: "Before I go I will send ahead the dastard elder of Mormondom!"

Escape she knew was next to impossible, for the laugh told her of the close proximity of a number of men, and suddenly a loud "hello!" announced that she had been discovered.

Vera stepped out from her horse and faced the dozen men who stood like statues a few feet away with their eyes fastened upon her.

"It is a woman! Vera our sorceress!" exclaimed several.

"Ther woman what killed Grim George?"

The last announcement seemed enough; it started the men forward, and the cool woman heard the ominous clicking of the pistol locks.

"Dropshot ain't hyer, but we transact business for him!" cried the giant who stood at the head of the gang. "Throw up yer hands, Vera. We've got ther drop on ther sorceress ov Red Eye, an' thar's no masked female about ter interfere now!"

The huntress saw the gleaming barrels at the end of the uplifted hands of the sierra pards; she knew them all—men who would not hesitate to carry out any threat they might make.

Placed thus suddenly at the mercy of such men, Vera advanced toward them.

"Halt her!" said a voice in the crowd. "Don't let ther sorceress get in any ov her black art. Stop her with yer pistol! you in front thar! Ther touch ov a witch is death!"

"A witch!" broke out Vera with a derisive laugh. "The men of Red Eye would run at the shadow of one. I'm no witch. Behold in me only Vera, a woman, human, like you all. Is Thunder Tom here?"

"Hyar I am!"

"Go to your shanty and read what is written on your table."

"I will arter we've settled with you."

"Go now."

"I will not. I am Dropshot's pard. I lead these men. You came back ter Red Eye at ther wrong time, Vera. What shall it be, pards—death or liberty?"

The stalwart speaker had turned to the crowd again, and Vera stood erect with her eyes regarding all.

"Court is liable ter open hyer at any time," he went on, shooting her a swift glance. "We want to hear no evidence now. Ther dead man on ther mountain is proof enough. You've confessed ter killin' him, woman. By ther midnight stars, Vera, you came back at ther wrong time for yer own good!"

The sorceress was about to reply, but Thunder Tom executed a forbidding gesture with his hand.

"Silence! ther court's in session!" he cried. "What's yer verdict, men? This is no Dagger Johnny case, we want no sympathy now. This woman killed Grim George!"

The pards did not consult long. Vera read the verdict in their bronze faces while the leader spoke.

"Our verdict is death," said one of the men, addressing both Thunder Tom and the sorceress. "In what form?"

"Cabin number four!"

Despite her assumed calmness, the woman gave a great start.

"It is the most horrible death you can inflict," she said. "Once more, Thunder Tom, I beg of you to go to your cabin."

"Arter ther execution!" was the answer, as the hand of the speaker touched Vera's arm, and he went on in a whisper. "I think you don't remember me. We mountain larks always hev ter change our names sometimes in life. I'm one ov thet kind. I've figured out finally who you ar'. You ar' the daughter ov ther Gentile captain, who with his family—all save you—war killed in Mormondom on ther 10th of July."

Vera could not keep back an exclamation of surprise which was a confirmation of Thunder Tom's words.

"I hit it, didn't I?" laughed the Red Eye pard. "You ar' Edna Boynton an' I—wal, I am Tom Sheldon."

"One of the two men who helped Dropshot Bluff that night. I thought he League caught and hung you afterward."

"So they did, but it isn't every hanged man thet dies in the noose," grinned the rough. "I

guess we'll finish in California the work begun in Mormondom."

Thunder Tom turned away as he finished.

"To cabin number four with this woman!" he said to the mountain pards.

Vera drew back with a cry, but at that moment the crowd rushed forward, and she was caught by a dozen hadns.

In the twinkling of an eye the sorceress was lifted from the ground and a moment later she was being carried over the ground as fast as the men could transport her.

"I must make one effort for release," she cried. "I have two blows to strike before my work ends."

Already the crowd was at the door of the cabin built over the pit with its deadly trapdoor. A boot kicked it open.

"Carry out the sentence, men ov Red Eye!" cried Thunder Tom. "Throw Grim George's assassin inter number four!"

Vera resisted, and summoning all her strength, she drew back.

"Listen to me!" she cried. "Your alcalde is Dave Dastard the hunted Mormon elder and Thunder Tom is his proscribed pard!"

CHAPTER XXV.

SWIFT VENGEANCE.

A BOISTEROUS laugh rolled from Thunder Tom's throat.

"Thet's ther last play ov a desperate woman!" he cried, seeing the men hesitate at the door of the fatal cabin.

"I swear it, men," exclaimed Vera with uplifted hand. "By the living God, it is true!"

"Oh, toss her in! Thar's no proof ter sustain a declaration like that. Dropshot Bluff can't be ther man she says he is an' I—ha, ha! what a lie she kin coin! Inter number four with the sorceress, pards."

"Give me time and I will prove my words," persisted Vera. "Thunder Tom has just confessed his identity. He has confided his well-kept secret to me when he thought I could never get to strike him. Your alcalde is Dave Dastard, and nobody knows it better than that villain there!"

Vera's finger covered the stalwart rough who had the eyes of all fastened upon him.

"All right, then; let her go," he suddenly growled. "Take her word rather than Thunder Tom's and let Grim George go unavenged. Think how for three years that woman played sorceress and spy here, think how she made half ov ther camp superstitious an' afraid of her. Oh, yes! take her word and let her go."

Thunder Tom stepped back with a well feigned look of disgust, but the pards of Red Eye still held Vera before the cabin door.

"We've got ter do suthin' with this woman," said one of the men. "There is blood on her hands."

"Keep her till Dropshot comes."

"Yes," said Vera whirling upon the speaker; "Keep me till your alcalde comes back. I am satisfied. Stand me face to face with that man. Let me prove to this camp that he is Dave Dastard the hunted Mormon elder."

"What do you say, Tom?" asked one appealing to the man who had partially turned away.

"Do what you please with her was the snap-pish reply. "If I had my way I'd finish ther tigress now."

Vera's eyes gleamed with derision as they followed the man who walked away. She did not see him enter his cabin where he lit a lamp, and the next moment started at the sentences traced in chalk across his table.

"That woman must die!" he hissed. "She knows who Dropshot is an' I hev told her that I am one ov the three who played that big game in Mormondom. Let Dropshot keep the gold secret if he has it. I will get my share ov ther bonanza when it is found. Dare they spare ther life ov Vera ther Viper? By Jehu! they shall not save it if they do!"

He erased the chalk marks with his sleeve and went out.

Ten minutes had passed since his separation from the mountain pards and Vera before the death-trap cabin.

In that time much could happen; Vera could be killed or saved.

"What did yer do with that woman?" he said stopping a man who emerged from a cabin near his own.

"She got away."

Thunder Tom bit his lip and let slip a terrible curse.

"You mean you let her go," he grated.

The pard said nothing.

"You took her lie an' threw my word ter ther winds," Tom went on. "A woman who kin play sorceress in Red Eye for three years is capable ov comin' any kind ov a scheme. You tle her go, I say."

"She swore positively—"

"Ter Tartarus with her oaths!" interrupted Thunder Tom. "She killed Grim George; that war enough ter consign her ter number four."

"But she swore that George war Dave Dastard's pard in that Mormon bizness."

"She said I war thar, too. Whar is ther man

in Red Eye who will face this sierra chick an' say thet?"

Thunder Tom stepped back a pace and drew a revolver.

"I'm able ter fight my own way," he went on. "The woman just set at liberty will link her name ter Red Eye in a manner that you won't like. She'll paint this camp red, for she'll get inter her head thet we all had a hand in that Mormon murder, an' our lives won't be safe. Thet's ther kind o' women you spare. I tell yer now thet when I get ther drop on her thar'll be a dead huntress in these mountains. Whar's ther boys?"

"I left 'em at Pluto Phil's cabin."

Thunder Tom, boiling with madness, strode away.

"I want ter tell 'em all ter the'r faces thet they let ther wrong bird go back ter ther bush. It war sworn once in solemn conclave in this very camp thet ef we ever found Dave Dastard an' his pards, we'd hand 'em over ter ther Gentile League. Dropshot an' I took ther oath laughin' in our sleeves. I never thought thet she would find us hyer; never suspected thet Vera ther Viper war ther avenger ov thet Gentile family."

Thunder Tom was half-way between his cabin and Pluto Phil's, where he expected to find the men he had lately left.

"Hello! what's thet?" he suddenly exclaimed, coming to a halt and leaning forward. "I saw suthin' like a ghost between ther two shanties thar. Say, you spy?—you—"

"Not another word, Thunder Tom," said a voice, and there halted before the desperado a figure from which he recoiled. "I have not left the camp after finding game like you. Drop your revolver! Throw up your hands!"

There was a weighty reason for Thunder Tom to obey these startling commands. He was looking into the muzzle of a six-shooter, which was held by a woman who stood like a statue of retribution in his path.

"I war lookin' for some sneak game on yer part," hissed the Red Eye rough. "When they saved you, they gave a tigress liberty."

"That they did! Were you going down to fathom the depths of cabin number four in search of Vera, Thunder Tom?"

"No."

"You will go with me, however. I am afraid that your confession of guilt was spoken at an unlucky hour for you."

"Which means thet in yer estimation, woman, Thunder Tom is at ther end ov his string?"

Vera's eyes flashed reply, but her lips said:

"March down between the cabins here. Raise no cry, send out no signal of distress. I step aside for you to pass. It is light enough for me to watch you closely, and I touch a deadly trigger with the finger of vengeance. Remember! march!"

Thunder Tom was at the mercy of the woman from Mormondom. He looked over the leveled revolver into the depths of her merciless eyes and stepped forward.

Vera hugged the cabin logs till he had passed then stepped quickly behind him and said:

"To Grim George's grave! The spot is not unknown to you, Thunder Tom. Forward!"

"Give me half a chance an' I'll show this woman a turn that will startle her!" the Red Eye pard hissed between his teeth. "She is playin' a desperate game ov her own; she came from Mormondom ter play it. I must hold ther winnin' hand soon or die."

Vera said nothing while she marched the sierra rough back of the cabins toward the mountain where in the light of moon and stars lay the grave of her first victim.

She kept out of reach of Thunder Tom's arms; he could not turn and seize her before she could shoot him dead.

The march to the grave did not occupy much time. For the most part, it led through the moonlight and on the mound itself the silvery beams lay like a coverlet of white.

Thunder Tom halted alongside the grave and turned upon the woman.

"Wal, hyer we ar'," he said, and then he continued in threatening tones: "Remember, if you strike me, you strike all Red Eye. They won't let you go ther second time."

"That is to be tested, Thunder Tom," was the answer. "I throw off the mask here. I am Edna Boynton the daughter of the Gentile major who, with his wife and three children were basely murdered by Dave Dastard and two pards. I escaped the massacre by being from home when it took place. It was no fault of the murderers, however. I need not detail my long hunt for the infamous villains. One lies under your feet, another is still at large, and I stand before the third. Move one step backward, Thunder Tom."

The ruffian hesitated; the move would force him to stand upon the grave behind him.

"Back!" said Vera sternly. "There is no mercy here!"

Thunder Tom moved back and stood directly over the grave of the dead pard.

"I did not bring you here to spare," Vera went on. "When you thought you had me at the threshold of death, you confessed your complicity in the Mormon murder. I thank you,

Thunder Tom. Now, sir, without mercy and without prayer, I send you to your eternal account."

The revolver leaped up till it covered the desperado's head.

"Another life for the Mormon crime!" spoke Vera sternly, and the next moment a flash of fire revealed the doomed pard's countenance.

Backward over the mountain grave tumbled the stalwart figure of Vera's victim, and a second later he was lying on his back with a bleeding face upturned.

"One whom I did not expect to find," muttered the avenger going forward; and bending over the prostrate body. "The fool made a trap for himself. He could not keep from me the secret he had guarded so well."

Down in the camp a group of men heard the report of the deadly revolver and looked into each other's faces.

"What does that mean?" asked more than one.

"Thunder Tom has found Vera," was the answer. "That shot was fired near whar Grim George sleeps. Let's investigate."

The crowd left Red Eye untenanted and moved in a body toward the well known spot.

"Hello! I war slightly mistaken!" suddenly exclaimed one of the number. "Vera found Thunder Tom—that's ther difference."

The Red Eye pards stood above the dead ruffian and looked down into his bloody face.

"Thar's a paper in his hand!" cried one.

It was true and an instant later half a dozen men were looking at the document in the light of a match.

"What does it say?" cried the others.

"This:

"If the body of this wretch is given burial within three days, I will call Red Eye to account. Dropshot Bluff is not to be molested if he comes back, though I swear that he is Dave Dastard the Mormon elder."

VERA THE AVENGER."

For a minute after the reading of the paper no one spoke. The match went out and was cast away in silence. It was a singular tableau.

"Shall we obey this paper?" asked one in a whisper at last.

"Yes. Let Thunder Tom rot whar he lies," was the reply. "For my part, I don't want this cool woman to open a shootin' matinee in Red Eye."

The speaker seemed to voice the opinion of the whole crowd, and without a dissenting voice it was resolved to go back to camp.

"That is sensible," murmured a person who had witnessed this scene. "I don't want to fight Red Eye Bar."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ALCALDE'S MERCY.

"It is useless for me to think longer. My head aches. I fear the secret has passed from me forever."

"Then we will find the mine without it."

Gilbert Golden who leaned against the rocky wall of a narrow trail deep in the heart of the sierra and miles from Red Eye started toward his companion and grasped his arm.

"I have done all I can do, Kennard," he exclaimed. "You do not blame me?"

"No, boy. I find no fault with you. You have tried to recall the locality; you have done all you can. We must find Ophir in some other manner."

"Why not go back?"

"To Sacramento, and with my oath unkept?" cried the Shasta Sleuth. "I am going to find it."

"And throw it at Queen Moro's feet?"

"Yes!"

"I don't like that woman. She hates Floss," said the youth. "If I could find the girl, I would bid adieu to the sierra; I'd let the gold-hunters fight it out among themselves."

For a moment the detective did not reply, but stood erect and looked searchingly at Gilbert. It was the day that followed Thunder Tom's death at the hands of Vera the sorceress, and the sun was once more dropping toward the western horizon.

"When we find Floss we'll put you both on the back trail," he said at last to the youth. "The wolves of Red Eye, the masked mystery and Vera, perhaps, will conspire against you both. Here you are not safe from hour to hour. You don't want to go back to the Bar now, eh, Gilbert?"

"At any time!" said the youth, his eyes flashing. "Do you think I have forgotten my experience beneath cabin number four? I dare you to go back to Red Eye, Keen Kennard."

The man from Shasta shook his head and smiled.

"I should not ask you to go back, Kennard. It is my fight, not yours. If I go back there it will be alone, and somebody will pay for the hanging in the pit!"

"They'd make short work of you and your secret. It would not be suspension again, boy, but death before twenty-five revolvers."

"It will be death here ef you galoots don't throw up yer hands," said a low voice that pierced the very wall behind the two men.

Gilbert started forward as if a serpent had hissed behind him, but the mountain detective

turned coolly with a hand at the butt of a silver-plated revolver.

"Dropshot Bluff and his gang!" ejaculated Gilbert, and the sight seemed to transform him into a statue in the trail.

"Ther alcalde ov Red Eye an' his boss back-in!" was the reply that came from the lips of the burly desperado whose knees and those of his ten companions told that they had crept to the spot where they stood. "This isn't exactly an unexpected catch, gents, but it's better luck than we expected when we left ther camp. Hands up, er heads down! take yer choice!"

Gilbert and Keen Kennard were looking into more than a dozen revolvers, and behind each blazed hungry eyes that gave out no look of mercy.

"Make the best of a bad bargain," whispered the Shasta detective. "They've got the drop on us for the present. Hands up, Gilbert, my boy."

The young keeper of the gold secret obeyed, and glanced at Keen Kennard to see that he had performed the same action.

Headed by Bluff, the roughs of Red Eye came down the trail with leveled revolvers.

Ten feet from the captured friends they halted and glanced at their leader.

"Throw yer weapons at ther foot ov ther wall!" he said, addressing Gilbert and the detective in stern tones. "You ar' no fool, Keen Kennard, or, Magic Merle. You know ther law ov ther mountains. Thar's no child's play hyer."

Kennard drew his revolvers and tossed them away in no good humor and with evident reluctance. Gilbert disposed of his weapons in the same manner.

"About face, an' forward!" commanded the big alcalde.

"Back to Red Eye?" asked Gilbert.

"No questions, an' no lies!" laughed Dropshot Bluff. "Remember, young man, that there is a sentence but half-carried out, that Lightnin' Lige is still unavenged!"

The youth bit his lips and his eye flashed resentfully.

"Don't think for a moment that I have forgotten!" he cried, throwing all his look upon the alcalde. "Your inhuman treatment forced me to shed blood, and—"

"Forward!" was the interruption. "Pards, ef ther youngster doesn't march in ten seconds drop him in his boots! We'll let ther gold secret go ter ther dogs."

"Obey," said Kennard, touching Gilbert's arm, and then he added in a low whisper. "I've played in worse games than this. Come!"

Side by side down the mountain marched Keen Kennard and his young friend. They heard the steady tramp of the Red Eye pards behind them, and knew that their deadly revolvers were still leveled at their heads.

For more than a mile the march was continued, neither party speaking in audible tones.

Were the captives being conducted back to Red Eye? Was there to be another terrible confinement in the horrid depths of cabin number four?

"Halt!" rung suddenly from the alcalde's throat, and the whole crowd stopped.

"It is coming now—death," said Gilbert in low tones.

Keen Kennard gave him a look of trust and defiance. The cool man from Shasta had not surrendered hope.

"We're goin' ter separate you two," continued the boss of Red Eye.

Gilbert stepped to the detective's side with an ejaculation of remonstrance.

"Back!" thundered Dropshot covering the youth with his own revolver. "Touch that man ther' an' I'll paint thet wall with yer brains."

The boy stood still as if cowed by the voice and the weapon.

"Come hyer, Gilbert," the alcalde quickly continued.

"Go," said Kennard in a whisper. "Go and trust in the future."

Gilbert advanced toward the band and a bronzed hand seized his arm when he came within reach.

"We now proceed ter carry out ther programme formed afore we covered yer," said Dropshot addressing both men. "Wild William, you will do your part ov ther work. Forward."

A tall rough stepped toward Keen Kennard followed by four men.

The detective awaited them quietly for he was covered all the time, and Gilbert soon saw his friend in the clutches of the stalwart five.

As for himself, he was in the hands of the alcalde and a part of the band and powerless of course to help the man who had helped him.

"Don't you never say good-by ter a friend when he leaves yer?" asked Dropshot Bluff. "Keen Kennard is goin' on a long journey!"

"My God! are you going to kill him?" cried the boy. "He saved my life—"

"Just as if Red Eye owes him a good turn for that, ha, ha!" laughed the alcalde. "Keen Kennard would be better off at this hour if he had never left the Shasta lair. He knows it now, an' he knows, too, thet ther lost gold trail leads ter death. Do yer duty, William."

The next moment Gilbert and the Shasta Sleuth were thrust into the midst of the respective gangs and started in opposite directions.

"Is this better than hangin' in number four?" suddenly laughed Dropshot Bluff looking down into Gilbert's face.

"Anything is preferable to that Stygian hell," was the answer as a shudder passed over the speaker's body.

"Yer wouldn't like ter repeat ther experience, eh, Gilbert?"

"No! if I am doomed to go back to that place, shoot me where I am!" cried the youth clutching the alcalde's arm. "Death here to unconsciousness and final starvation there!"

The boss of Red Eye jerked his arm from the boy's grasp and laughed.

"You'd be thar yet ef Keen Kennard hadn't come," he said. "Wild William an' his pards will make sure that ther fool from Shasta loses ther gold trail ter-night. What does yer head say now, Gilbert?"

"The secret is mine no longer," was the answer.

"We'll see about that in a few minutes."

"You doubt me, then?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Get the secret as best you can; but I tell you here, once for all, you will never hear it from my lips, for it is not mine to divulge."

There was no answer, only Dropshot Bluff looked at his companions and smiled derisively.

The shadows of night fell about Gilbert and his captors as they advanced up the mountains, following the trail as it wound in and out among the trees, and all the while leaving further and further below the path trod by the detective and his guard.

Not for a moment did the Red Eye pards take their eyes from Gilbert. He was not bound, but walked in their midst guarded by cocked revolvers, ready to scatter his brains at the first attempt at flight.

Still on the band moved up—up toward the first stars that showed themselves in the sky. Gilbert walked silently among his guards, eager ever to know what fate had been decreed for him.

More than once his thoughts went back to the man from Shasta. What had become of Keen Kennard? He liked that cool man, and then he owed him almost life itself.

The twilight march promised to become an endless one; Dropshot Bluff and pards seemed to be taking their young captive to the very summit of the mountain.

"Halt!"

The command was a relief to Gilbert, and when it was spoken the Red Eye roughs and their prisoner stood on the almost level summit of the peak. Below them was a dim country that stretched far away on either hand. It was slowly fading before the approach of night, but the keen eye could discern the ragged peaks in the distance.

"Doesn't ther view somewhar out thar recall ther lost Ophir?" asked the big alcalde, with a rapid sweep of his dark hand. "Take it all in an' answer me."

Gilbert looked over the extensive view for several minutes, and slowly shook his head.

"Nothing can recall it," he said, turning to Dropshot.

"You mean thet you're not goin' to tell."

"I mean that the secret has passed from my grasp."

"Pshaw!" cried the alcalde. "We want no foolishness at this stage ov the game, Gilbert. Red Eye is more desperate ter-night than it has ever been. This gold-hunt has ter come ter an end, an' thet almighty soon. We want ther secret. Step up hyer, Derringer Jack, with pencil an' paper."

A member of the party stepped forward, and took from beneath his coat a piece of dirty paper and the stub of a pencil.

"Hyer! ther map now!" said Dropshot Bluff, taking the materials and thrusting them into Gilbert's hands. "We ask yer for ther last time."

"I don't know," was the answer. "Heavens! that terrible secret has been the curse of my life. Willingly would I surrender it now, and forever be rid of it if I only knew."

The men behind the boy broke into a sarcastic laugh.

"You won't tell, eh?" said the alcalde.

"You have my answer. Why repeat it?"

"Did yer give it ter Keen Kennard?"

"No."

"Dropshot Bluff ground his teeth, and looked into the faces of his mountain gang."

"Drive 'im ter ther wall," whispered Derringer Jack. "He'll divulge it thar."

The next second the alcalde of Red Eye faced Gilbert once more.

"We give yer three minutes, Gilbert," he said, madly. "I'll show yer what's below us," and grasping the youth's arm, he led him forward until he stood on the very edge of the little table-land, with a darkening abyss beneath.

"Now," continued Dropshot, stepping back, suddenly, leaving Gilbert on the brink. "Now for ther gold secret, or a push inter eternity!"

The men took a step forward and thrust their revolvers into the white face of the threatened youth.

"Oh, for a moment with a revolver!" flashed across Gilbert's brain. "This is the future to which Keen Kennard bade me look with hope. It is doom!"

"Count five, Jack!" said Dropshot Bluff to his lieutenant in buckskin. "Ther boy has but ter throw up his hand ter save his life. Ther action will indicate thet he will divulge ther gold secret. Now, Derringer."

Derringer Jack looked at Gilbert, and began to count. The only sound heard was the desperado's voice as it pronounced the numerals.

"One—two—three—four—"

The counter hesitated, and looked at the alcalde.

"Go on!" thundered the big sport.

"Five!"

Not a word from Gilbert's lips.

Dropshot Bluff sprung forward with a curse.

"Jump! we play no fool game now, Gilbert Golden!"

The boy turned, the ground gave way beneath him, and he disappeared!

CHAPTER XXVII.

KEEN KENNARD'S FORTUNES.

THE pard of Red Eye seemed to be thrilled by the terrible fall of the youth. They sprung back as if the whole surface of the mountain summit was about to leave their feet.

"He didn't jump," said Dropshot Bluff, who was the first one to break the silence. "Ther edge of the cliff crumbled under his feet. I half-believe thet he would hev given us ther secret."

No; Gilbert Golden could not part with anything he did not possess.

At last the leader of the gold-pards ventured forward and looked down the mountain. He saw no sign of the lost man of Gold Gorge; the thousands of trees rising like ghosts far below seemed to tell a story of doom.

"Now for our pards," said the alcalde, turning to his men. "Ere this they have finished Keen Kennard, the gold sleuth from Shasta. We hev now ter find the lost bonanza by some other method than through ther boy. He is dead."

They turned away and went down the trail they had followed to the top of the mountain, Dropshot Bluff in the lead. Not one suggested a journey to the spot where Gilbert must have struck, and it is more than probable that the big alcalde would have greeted with derision a suggestion of the kind.

Where was the man from Shasta?

In the midst of the men headed by Wild William he was marched, as we have seen, in a direction directly opposite the one taken by Gilbert's bronze guard.

The faces of the band were turned toward Red Eye, but it was not their intention to conduct the gold detective back to the famous camp.

Keen Kennard walked erect covered by the revolvers of the five, and watched constantly by eyes that exhibited no gleams of mercy.

While Gilbert was climbing the mountain Kennard was moving over a sloping trail down into a little valley where the pines grew in little groups and where the grass was thick and like a velvet carpet.

Wild William seemed to have a certain destination in view for he walked before the band and led the way to the very depths of the secluded valley when he came to a sudden halt, and wheeled upon his prisoner.

"Ther's no use in callin' ther rules, Keen Kennard," he said. "This is ther sierra kentry. Man makes law hyer, an' sarcumstances executes whar ther is no law."

The man from Shasta who looked into the stern faces of the men in the waning twilight did not stir.

Folding his arms upon his breast he threw back his head in a haughty manner, but said nothing.

"We carry out Dropshot's orders," continued Wild William. "Ther court ov Red Eye hez passed sentence on you."

"Without giving a man a chance," suddenly sneered the cool head. "This is the justice of the bravest court I ever saw. Gentlemen of Red Eye, this wouldn't be practiced where men are cowards. They give a man a chance where I came from. We give our hoss-thieves a show in Shasta land; but I forget. This is the sierra kentry; we are under the rule of the alcalde of Red Eye Bar!"

Rough as the desperadoes were, they winced under the detective's cutting sentences.

"Show er not, we're hyer ter execute," said Wild William.

"You mean to murder!"

Keen Kennard leaned forward as he spoke these words, and ran his hand down before the faces of the men by whom he was confronted.

"Before I ever saw Red Eye Bar," he said, "I was told about the coolness, the bravery of its people. I have found them. I stand before five representatives of that celebrated place, and I am covered by the revolvers of them all. Gentlemen, have I believed a lie? Has Shasta heard

a falsehood about your bravery? I used to tell the camps thar that I would vouch for the bravery of Red Eye. I hev even backed yer character when men talked about it. I hev stood by men whom I never saw until a few days ago. Pardon me! I have been deceived. I have backed the wrong men."

"Nobody asked yer ter," growled Wild William.

"I did it because I thought men were given a show hyer," was the prompt reply. "I would be ashamed to go back to Shasta, now."

"What kind ov a show d'yer want?" snapped Wild William, whom the detective's words cut like daggers.

"A chance for dying like a man ought to die," said the Shastan. "I would grant my meanest enemy that."

"Mention ther chance, an' we'll consult."

The faintest trace of success appeared in a smile at the corners of the detective's mouth. He was making a desperate man's fight for life and with but little hope of final victory.

"I once saw a fight in Colorado between three men," he said. "The right legs of two, from the knees down, were bound to the left leg of the other. They fought with knives—ten inch bowies—two men against one. It did not last a minute, gents. It wasn't a fair fight—ther doomed galcot hed a chance in a million, an' lost."

"Got killed, eh?" cried Wild William, starting forward, a sudden thought lighting up his eyes.

"As a matter of course!" said Keen Kennard, coolly. "It war hardly a chance in a milion as I've said, but it war better than being shot down in cold blood—murdered by a gang."

"Is thet yer proposition?" asked the leader of the roughs.

"I'll fight two of you in that manner."

Wild William stepped back. "It ar' ag'in' orders," he said to himself, "but whar's his chance? Two ag'in' one! Why, with Bodie Bill an me tied ter him he wouldn't stan' ther ghost ov a show!"

Keen Kennard seemed to know what was passing in the mind of the Red Eye pard; he resumed his old position and bided his time.

"Hang me, ef we don't give yer ther one chance," suddenly exclaimed Wild William. "Produce ther cords, men, an' Bodie Bill an' Wild William will give yer a tussle."

"Not this chick!" said a man in the crowd, and the speaker who was a well-built man shrunk away. "Please excuse Bodie Bill from fightin' thet way."

"Why not?" cried Wild William whirling up on the speaker. "Thet man knows thet ther odds ar' ag'in' him."

"Nary a fight," growled Bodie Bill.

"Coward!" hissed the alcalde's lieutenant.

Bodie Bill who was in the act of walking off turned and took one great stride toward Wild William.

"You want my reasons, eh?" he exclaimed. "Wal, hyer they ar'! I saw a fight ov thet kind once in my life, in a camp along ther San Joaquin. We hed caught a cabin-burner from Pistol Gulch, a rival colony, an' war goin' ter shoot 'im when he made ther very proposition that man has made. We took up with ther scheme at once, bound Parson Paul an' Cool Carl ter him an' dropped ther hat."

Bodie Bill stopped as if he had reached the end of his narrative.

"Wal, what happened next?" asked Wild William.

"Just what might happen if you play that game hyer," was the answer. "We buried Paul an' Carl thet night. Jehu! ther man they fought war a holy terror in a three cornered fight. No; please excuse me. Take another sucker, Wild William."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the detective till Bodie Bill's face grew black. "I don't want to fight cowards. I prefer to face men who will fight when all the odds are in their favor."

"Wal, yer won't fight this golden chick," snapped Bodie Bill.

"By Jupiter! I want ter see that three-cornered fight. Who will j'ine me in it?" and Wild William scanned the faces of the men before him. "Will you, Cipher Clade?"

The man addressed shrunk back with a gesture of refusal.

"Will you, Marmoset?"

"I rather not, cap'n!"

"By Jehosaphat! I will!"

At the same time the speaker stepped forward, and Keen Kennard fixed his eyes upon him.

In stature he towered several inches above the Shasta detective; he was a perfect Hercules, broad-shouldered, long-armed, and a veritable athlete.

"Thar's grit in Red Eye for all," said Wild William, greeting the new ally. "Mark Maroon will redeem the camp. Now, tie us ter ther prisoner."

Wild William and Mark Maroon divested themselves of their jackets and threw them side by side on the grass.

"Strip!" the former said to Keen Kennard, and the next minute the gold detective had followed their example.

A cord sufficient to secure the limbs of the men as designated by the Shastan in his brief account of the three-cornered fight in the North, was found in the crowd, and Marmoset did the work.

It did not take long, and when he stepped back the three men stood in the fading light thus strangely united.

"Give him a knife," commanded Wild William. "We don't intend ter begin without givin' him one chance for his life."

Marmoset stepped forward again and placed his own bowie in Keen Kennard's hands, then looked at Wild William, as he asked:

"What's ter be ther signal?"

"A count," was the answer. "Is that fair Kennard?"

"Perfectly," was the reply.

At that moment Bodie Bill threw his head back toward his nearest companion and said, in a whisper:

"Thar'll only be three of us ter jine Dropshot an' ther rest. No man proposes a fight ov thet kind thet doesn't understand the terrible sleight ov killin' two men in a second."

The man who heard these words tightened his grip on his revolver, and looked at Marmoset, who had taken off his hat and stepped to one side where the three duelists could see him.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready!" responded the three men.

Bodie Bill stepped back and lifted his revolver.

"By ther eternal! we'll cut three dead men loose," he grated, "for if Keen Kennard wins this fight I intend ter drop him on ther field ov battle."

"Go on!" said Wild William, impatiently. "We've been tied together ter fight. Proceed with ther count, Marmoset. At ther fifth number we open ther ball."

But Marmoset did not proceed.

"Hades an' horns!" roared Wild William again. "What's got inter yer, Marmoset?"

"Let somebody else call," said Marmoset, stepping aside. "I beg ter be excused ter-night."

"You've seen suthin'."

"I hev. Look yonder, all ov yer, an' see for yourselves."

In an instant all eyes were directed toward the spot faced by Marmoset. For a moment nothing startling was seen, and then a wild cry rung from Wild William's throat.

"Ther woman in ther black mask!" he exclaimed.

"Queen Moro!" said Keen Kennard.

The person named came forward slowly, mounted on a fine-limbed horse. The men awaited her as motionless as statues.

"She sha'n't interfere," growled Wild William. "This is not Grim George's grave, an' Keen Kennard is not Vera ther sorceress. Cover that woman with yer weapons, men."

"Not if you value your lives!" came over the horse's head from lips hidden by the black mask. "Far from stopping this fight, I decree that it shall proceed. The man called Keen Kennard was once in my service, but I consider him out of it now. We will waste no time with words. I will give the usual signal in affairs of this kind. When I have counted three, the men bound together will fight."

Silence followed Queen Moro's words, and the three cool and desperate men were seen to tighten their grips on the bowies.

"All ready now, gentlemen," continued the masked woman. "I want this fight to be to the death. The man who shrinks is a coward. Now: One—two—three!"

For a second after the delivery of the last number the three men did not stir, but the next instant three bronzed hands carried aloft as many bowies.

There was a moment of terrible suspense, then three arms came down!

Nobody could count the blows that followed, they were given with such terrible rapidity. Two sharp cries followed the strokes, the three men closed for a moment as if they had clinched, and then separated.

The breathless spectators started forward.

"Back!" cried Queen Moro to them. "This duel is to the death!"

"And to the death it has been fought!" said Keen Kennard, coolly; and the next minute the knife he held cut the rope that had bound him to his foes, and he stepped forward.

"There is a sleight in fighting two men at once," he said, with a smile, "as the two generally find out to their cost!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WORK OF A MATCH.

"WHAT did I tell yer?" said Bodie Bill who had witnessed the duel he had tried to prevent. "Thar's a sleight in fightin' two men at once tied together in thet way," and then he added in a whisper to the thunderstruck pards: "We must avenge ther boys!"

Meantime, Keen Kennard had walked to where Queen Moro sat on her horse and was looking up into her eyes.

"We've been a long while getting together," he said.

"Yes, and we need not remain together long. You have failed me, Kennard. The oath taken in Sacramento you have broken. I could shoot you where you stand, but I spare. There stand some of the bitterest enemies man ever had. They are ready to riddle you, but they fear me."

The woman glanced at the Red Eye pards as she finished. She saw the dark hands that clutched the deadly revolvers.

Keen Kennard saw them, too.

"Gentlemen," she said addressing Bodie Bill and his pards. "This man shall be your prey at the end of thirty minutes. After that time the hand of Queen Moro will not be interposed to save him. Come, Kennard."

The strange woman turned her horse's head and rode off with the man from Shasta walking alongside under the protection of her six shooter.

"Remember!" she said glancing down into Kennard's face, "remember, I say, that I am going to leave you at the end of thirty minutes."

A haughty smile appeared at the corners of the detective's mouth; his eyes seemed to gleam with defiance.

"You can leave me now if you wish," he said.

"Not yet, oath-breaker," was the response.

Keen Kennard threw up his hand and caught the woman's arm.

"I have broken no oath," he said almost fiercely.

"You promised to find the lost mine?"

"I did."

"Months have passed away."

"Yes."

"And the lost Ophir is still lost. You have never reported. Your failure has drawn me from Sacramento."

"You forget that the Red Eye pards were lost, too," said the detective. "I had to find a trail. I had to find Gilbert Golden the lost man of Gold Gorge—"

"And when you had found him you accomplished nothing!" interrupted the woman. "I wouldn't give a filled eagle for your detective qualities, Kennard of Shasta. You have been overrated. Men lied to me."

"Then find the bonanza for yourself if you can!" cried the gold detective stepping clear of the horse. "The men of Red Eye need not wait out your thirty minutes. I never took an oath I did not keep. No man can accuse Kennard of Shasta of breaking one vow."

Queen Moro laughed till the black mask shook.

"You still intend to keep the last one, eh?" she cried.

"Yes!"

"I don't hold you to it. I am on the ground myself, Keen Kennard. Before long you will be the hunted, not the hunter. I had been told that one man could fight to a successful issue a triangular duel, but I never believed it till I saw you do the deed. There must be a sleight in it."

"A sleight, and good strokes," smiled the detective. "But, good-by."

Queen Moro looked at him from her saddle but said nothing.

"When we meet again I may be able to throw the key to the lost bonanza at your feet," he went on as he stepped back.

"You can't do that," was the answer.

"Wait and see."

Keen Kennard waved his hand in an adieu and turned away.

"Accept this from me," she said. "I would make you equal to your foes at least."

He stopped and looked over his shoulder; the woman was in the act of tossing a revolver toward him.

"I don't want it," he said with a gesture of refusal. "I can arm myself."

But the woman would not listen; she threw the weapon and a moment later it lay at the detective's feet.

"She's more of a mystery than ever," said Keen Kennard, picking up the weapon, and then glancing at the woman riding away. "By the stars of heaven! I will yet show her that I never break an oath!"

Half an hour later the man from Shasta might have been seen moving over a mountain trail.

He was alone, and if foes were on his track he did not know it.

"What did they do with Gilbert?" he said.

"Woe to Dropshot Bluff if he has shed the blood of that boy!"

"Woe-ter ther big galoot, anyhow!" said a voice near by.

In an instant the detective had turned and he now stood in the trail with cocked revolver and eyes on the alert.

"Come forward. I've got the drop," he said, and a man came from the deep shadows of the trail.

"Always you!" exclaimed Keen Kennard, looking into the man's face. "Have you out-tussled death, Dagger Johnny?"

"It looks that way," was the reply. "Of course, I'm no well man, but I've got the upper hand ov ther grim monster, an' I'm goin' ter hold it till I've made a few rough places even. Woe ter Dropshot ef he's touched ther boy, did yer say?"

"Yes."

"Wal, he's touched 'im."

Keen Kennard could not keep back an ejaculation of rage.

"How do you know?" he asked, "I want the truth—no falsehoods, Johnny."

"I measure off straight goods," said the exiled pard. "I saw ther gang go down the mountain awhile ago. They passed under me, an' I heard 'em laugh how ther ground left Gilbert's feet all ov a sudden."

"Heavens! they hung him!" cried Kennard.

"It looks that way."

"Somebody will pay for this," the detective went on. "Was the alcalde with the crowd?"

"Yes."

"And they were moving—"

"Toward Red Eye."

Keen Kennard looked up the mountain.

"It happened up there," he murmured. "Up yonder somewhere they finished Gilbert, the infernal fiends did. Say, Johnny?"

"Well."

"Come with me. We will find Gilbert first."

"Then what?"

"Then, by the eternal! we'll make somebody sweat for the infamous job."

"Will you go ter Red Eye, cap'n?" asked the exile eagerly, as he leaned forward.

"To Tartarus, if necessary!" was the quick response.

"I'm with you, Kennard. You kin count on Dagger Johnny. They finished ther boy on ther very top ov ther mountain. I heard one ov 'em laugh how ther ground left his feet thar."

"Up to the summit, then."

For several hours the two men toiled through the starlight toward the bare peak far above their heads.

Keen Kennard followed the man, who seemed to gather strength little by little as he advanced. It was a wearisome climb—now over rocks that littered the winding trail, now over ground that afforded no obstacles.

They reached the summit at last.

"Nothin' hyer, artor all!" exclaimed Dagger Johnny, turning with an air of disappointment upon Keen Kennard.

The detective inspected the spot thoroughly before he replied.

"Men have been here," he said, striking a match, and holding it near the ground. "I can see where they stood. What did they say about Gilbert?"

"They said that ther ground left his feet almighty sudden," said Dagger Johnny.

"It couldn't have been by hanging, then. They got rid of the boy in some other manner."

"Mebbe by makin' him jump," suggested the exiled pard.

Keen Kennard started toward the edge of the little plateau. Suddenly he uttered a cry. Dagger Johnny sprung forward.

"The ground crumbled with him here. I see it all!" said the detective pointing to the broken edge of the 'table' at his feet. "The boy did not jump, but the ground left his feet all the same. He fell here."

Dagger Johnny leaned forward and looked over the edge, but saw nothing but darkness below.

"Ther gold-secret is lost forever now," he murmured.

Keen Kennard said nothing but turned away and picked up half a dozen pine cones and bunched them by the aid of a string. Then he touched a match to the heap and turned to his companion.

"Watch down there now," he said as the canes blazed up. "I am going to send a searcher after Gilbert. If you see anything, tell me."

"All ready, cap'n! blaze away!"

The next minute the detective dropped the fiery mass over the edge of the plateau and it fell downward illumining the mountain as it went, and followed by the dilated eyes of the Red Eye pard.

"Jehosaphat!" suddenly fell from Dagger Johnny's lips.

"What is it?" cried Keen Kennard springing to his side.

"Down thar!" said the pard pointing after the fire-ball. "I saw it but for a moment. Now—"

"You saw what?"

"Something lyin' in a tree as ther ball hissed by. Thar! it has set a dead tree on fire! Look! look! Kennard."

The detective was already looking.

"Thar's ther object ag'in!" continued Dagger Johnny excitedly. "Isn't thet a human body lyin' in thet tree away down thar? Heavens! how thet fire spreads! Ther pines ar' dry, an' ther hull mountain will be in flames in a few minutes."

"That object has a human shape," said Kennard. "It may be Gilbert, but—"

"Thar! ther fire has reached ther tree thet holds it!" exclaimed Dagger Johnny.

"Great God! it is too true!"

The sight witnessed by the two men was fast becoming one of horror. The fire-balls had fallen into a dead tree whose foliage as dry as tinder had been ignited, and was now a mass of flames. Other trees near by were beginning to

burn, and the whole mountain-side seemed doomed to destruction.

But the center of attraction was the object which had been discovered by the two hunters in one of the trees, and the tree itself had yielded to the fire.

The object which was far beneath them had the semblance of a human form, but nothing more could be distinguished.

Keen Kennard seemed fastened to the spot with horror. He saw the fire leap from branch to branch, and heard the crackling of boughs as the red demon attacked them.

An' all this was the work of the flaming ball sent out on the hunt of Gilbert.

"Thar goes our man!" suddenly said Dagger Johnny.

Keen Kennard sprung up with a startling cry.

"He has fallen down among the trees, where the ground must be a mass of burning cones!" he exclaimed.

"Wal, he's past feelin' ther fire," was the response. "I don't know what you'll do, Kennard ov Shasta, but ef Gilbert war my pard, as he appears ter hev been yours, I know what'd be my next step."

"Speak it," said the detective, as Dagger Johnny hesitated.

"I'd pay my respects ter ther galoots ov Red Eye—ter Dropshot Bluff an' pards!"

"You would?" smiled Keen Kennard.

"Ef I wouldn't, shoot me for a deacon!"

"We will first find out what was the object we saw," the detective said quietly.

"With thet fire ragin' down thar?" cried the excited pard. "You never kin, Kennard."

"I have never failed on any hunt. We must go down and encircle the mountain. When we have discovered Gilbert's fate, we will move on the hyenas' den."

Dagger Johnny looked at the cool man, but made no audible reply.

"We'll hev ter wait till ther fires cool ter find a lot ov bones," he said to himself. "Hang it all! ef Dropshot hedn't finished Gilbert, ther gold secret would not be lost. But I'll stick ter this man. Thar'll be fun if we go back ter Red Eye together."

Keen Kennard had already stepped away on the downward trail, and the exile sprung after him.

"The boy first," said the detective, glancing at Dagger Johnny. "I'm with yer, Kennard!"

Twenty minutes afterward the two men stood on a level with the blazing trees which covered a great area and were still burning with fury.

Ahead was a mass of fire which no human could penetrate, and the wind was increasing its work.

Keen Kennard looked at the red terror and instinctively drew back. Dagger Johnny heard his teeth grind.

"Come! ter Red Eye!" he cried seizing the detective's arm. "We kin make ther camp hotter than this mountain! I'd sooner open a shootin' matinee than them find Ophir."

For a moment there was no response. A strong wind blew a burning coal into Kennard's face, and whirling on his heel he hissed madly.

"To Red Eye!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

MUTINY IN RED EYE.

RED EYE BAR once more.

Night gathered about the place while Big Bluff led his men from the darker shadows that rested in the mountains and entered the camp.

It was the night after the work of Keen Kennard's fireball, and the alcalde headed a reunited band, for the men who had given the Shasta Shadow "a chance," much to their own discomfiture as we have seen, were with the boss of Red Eye.

Dropshot was in no good humor; he had to be snarlish under the circumstances. They had failed to finish the detective, and the fate of Gilbert had sealed the gold secret forever. Floss was still missing, also Queen Moro, and the alcalde had gone back to Red Eye in hopes that the men sent ahead under Thunder Tom had found a clew.

He was not prepared for the news that met him when he entered the camp.

Thunder Tom was dead, and his companions told how Vera had been caught in camp, how she had escaped, and how they afterward heard a shot and found Thunder Tom lying dead across Grim George's grave.

This was information that made the alcalde grind his teeth and swear a new oath against the banished sorceress of the Bar.

The men had no news of Floss; they had not found her trail, and Dropshot Bluff could say that Duncan killed alone among the mountains, died without a word about the girl's whereabouts. Duncan would not tell that Queen Moro had quietly despoiled him of Floss; he thought her safer in the masked woman's clutches than in the big alcalde's.

Cursing the fates that seemed against him by agreement, Dropshot Bluff went to his cabin and struck a light.

Almost the first thing he saw was a bit of

paper on the table, and the next moment he pounced upon it like an eagle.

He could not keep back a cry when he saw the contents of the unexpected find.

It was the gold map!

For a moment the alcalde of Red Eye could scarcely credit the evidence of sight. He shut the door which stood slightly ajar and sat down at the table. His heart seemed to stand still for joy; the blood in his temples was like boiling water.

He never thought that the map might be a decoy; he studied it in the lamplight and mastered the lines one by one like a person masters the parts of an enigma.

He saw below the map these words:

"Here is the gold map, Dropshot. Now lead your men to Ophir."

"We'll see about leadin' 'em thar some other time!" ejaculated the alcalde. "I found this map hyer; it war left for me an' I kin do as I please. Lead ther boys ter a place I've earned myself by my persistence? We'll see about that!"

The ending of the second hour after the alcalde's return found him still at the table mastering the diagram. By degrees the exact location of the lost mine was dawning upon him. He saw that at that very moment he was not very far from the spot.

Strange to say, he had founded Red Eye within a few miles of the wonderful bonanza big enough to enrich the whole camp.

Why not tell his companions? They had stood by him through thick and thin, they had bound their very souls to him in a compact which, as a whole, had been faithfully kept.

But no! the greed of gold, the desire of possessing the entire "find" took possession of him the moment he found the priceless diagram in his hands. He forgot his pards, or, if he thought of them, it was to vow secretly that they might find it if they could.

The alcalde thought he had mastered the whole thing when he deposited the paper next to his skin and got up. He did not stop to inquire who had left the map on the table; it could not have been Gilbert.

Dropshot Bluff had stepped from the table when the door moved and a man's head appeared.

"Cap'n," said the caller who was the smallest man in the camp, a well-built person of five feet with sandy hair and restless gray eyes. "Cap'n, I'm afraid Red Eye's goin' ter hev an internal revolution."

"Come in and give me ther lay-out," said the alcalde. "I didn't like certain looks I saw when Flush Flip war tellin' me about Vera's comin' an' Thunder Tom's death."

The man shut the door securely behind him and approached the table.

"Now, go on," said Dropshot, in low tones of command.

"Thar war one thing Flush Flip left out ov his story, cap'n, an' that war why Vera shot Thunder Tom," the sandy-haired rough went on. "It warn't because Tom war so eager ter introduce her ter cabin number four—it warn't that, Cap'n Dropshot—"

"Wal, why war it, then?"

"It war because she called him Tom Sheldon an' accused 'im ov bein' one ov ther three Mormons wanted by ther Gentile League."

The alcalde started only slightly, but he leaned forward and laid his hand on the little man's shoulder.

"What do they say now?—that's what I want ter know," he said. "They don't b'lieve ther Viper do they, Gabe?"

"That's just what they do," was the answer. "They say thet Vera called yer Dave Dastard, ther man wanted for thet crime ov ther 10th ov July in Mormondom."

"Who says this?"

Dropshot Bluff grated the question between his teeth.

"More'n half ther pards."

"Who is ther leader?"

"Rattlin' Roy."

"Ther man I saved from a Comanche stake! Thet's gratitude!" said the alcalde, with a smile.

"Ar' thar any signs ov mutiny, Gabe?"

"Wal, I should whisper," was the answer. "For once old Red Eye is about ter divide," the little man went on. "Ef ye ar' Dave Dastard, cap'n, you'll hev ter fight er go ter Mormondom with Red Eye for an escort."

"Is it so bad as that?" cried the alcalde, unable to restrain himself.

"Yes."

"An' I am Dastard ther Mormon elder because that woman said so?"

"Ther boys hev got thet inter ther heads."

For a moment the alcalde of Red Eye was silent. He saw the danger that surrounded him.

"Ar' ye thet man, cap'n?" asked Gold Gabe, curiously as he fastened his eyes on the rough's face.

"Do you think I am?" cried Dropshot Bluff, bending forward till his face almost touched the little man's. "Do I look like Dave Dastard?"

"I—I never saw him," stammered Gabe.

"Do you think I am he?"

"I only know what Vera said."

"Vera ther liar!" ejaculated the alcalde. "What if I war Dave Dastard, Gabe? Would you turn ag'in' me?"

The Red Eye pard recoiled.

"Cap'n, I've been taught ter regard that murder one ov ther most devilish that war ever perpetrated by man," he said. "I've been one ov yer right-bowers for ten years. I've stood by yer through thick an' thin; but ef you ar' Dave Dastard—"

Gold Gabe paused as if awed into silence by the alcalde's look.

"Why don't you finish yer sentence?" laughed Dropshot Bluff. "I didn't stop yer."

Gold Gabe remained silent. He stared at the man before him and looked very foolish and much frightened.

"You'd quit me, eh?—you'd league yerself with Rattlin' Roy?" and for the second time the alcalde's hand descended upon the little man's shoulder.

There was no withdrawal from that terrible clutch.

"Wal, I am ther Mormon elder!" said Dropshot Bluff. "I am ther identical Dave Dastard who got even with Uncle Sam's officer an' his family years ago in Mormondom. You don't want ter yell, Gold Gabe; yer don't want ter say that you ar' ready ter j'ine Rattlin' Roy an' pards. I've played it long enough among you boys. I hev beaten ther Gentile League, an' ther pards in thet Mormon game who hev fallen died by ther hand ov Vera ther Viper."

"Yes, by ther pistol ov thersorcereess," gasped Gold Gabe.

Dropshot Bluff held the man at arm's length for a moment and then dragged him to the table.

"I always said that when ther crisis came, ef it ever came, I would meet it," he continued, displaying to the little man the visage of a cool thug. "It is hyer, now. It confronts me in Red Eye. Ar' they preparin' for a descent, Gabe? I want ther truth; ther shadder ov a lie seals yer doom!"

"I came hyer ter warn yer, cap'n," was the reply.

"An' ter say almost that if I war Dave Dastard ye'd turn from me an' hand me over ter ther Gentile League."

"I don't think I could do that. Honor bright, cap'n—"

"No squirmen' now!" interrupted the alcalde.

"Am I ter be entrapped?"

"It looks that way."

"By Rattlin' Roy an' pards?"

"Yes."

"For transportation ter Mormondom?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Not while ther sun moves!" cried Dropshot Bluff. "I begin hyer a game that will be played ter ther end if it costs every drop ov blood in Red Eye!"

Before Gold Gabe could anticipate a single movement, the alcalde's hand landed at his throat, and closed there so suddenly and ferociously that the little man was lifted almost off his feet.

The eyes of the big alcalde gleamed like the orbs of a maddened tiger; he looked down into the blackening face of the man he forced across the table, and while he held him there, tightening his grip by degrees, he looked like a devil in victory.

"One by one thus, if they give me provocation!" he hissed as Gold Gabe ceased to struggle. "As Dropshot Bluff I can play one game, as Dave Dastard another!"

For several minutes his terrible grip at the little man's throat did not relax; he held him in the light of his lamp until he no longer struggled in the least.

"They made me absolute monarch hyer, an' by heavens! that is what I will be!" he exclaimed, suddenly removing his hand, and a human body dropped to the ground. "I am goin' to the end of the gold trail I have found to-night. I have Gilbert's secret at last, an' it's worth fightin' for. Dave Dastard, eh? Found out at last! Thar ar' those in Red Eye who may discover that the sting ov ther Mormon serpent is death!"

A moment later the big alcalde took the lamp, and held it close to the face of the man on the floor. The face was almost black, and Gold Gabe lay still.

"Who's out thar?" suddenly exclaimed the alcalde, starting up and then toward the door. "Have they come for me, as Gabe intimated?"

At that instant the door was pushed open the width of a hand, and something was thrown upon the table.

Dropshot Bluff reached the threshold in another bound; he threw open the door and looked out, but not a soul was in sight.

After awhile he went back to the table, and picked up the object that lay upon it, which was a piece of paper.

The little sheet had seen its best days, for it was no longer white, and the alcalde hastened to open it.

"What is this?" he murmured, as he looked at the strangely-formed letters. "Gold Gabe warn't a mile from ther mark, arter all."

Then he read the paper, which ran thus:

"DROPSHOT BLUFF:—Yer escort ter Mormondom will be hyer within ten minutes."

The alcalde looked up and hissed:

"I never go back thar alive!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TRIGGER ROUTE.

GOLD GABE had told a true story; there was mutiny in Red Eye.

If there was any one thing hated above all o hers in the sierra country, it was the infamous crime which, happening a few years prior to the opening of our story, had blackened anew the name of Mormondom.

It was that crime which had called into existence the Gentile League mentioned in preceding chapters; it had hanged one man, and hunted two more beyond the limits of the territory, and while it had passed from the minds of some men, it had not been forgotten.

For years everybody had been on the lookout for Dave Dastard, the Mormon elder and his outlawed pard; notices and offers of reward were seen in every gold-camp; but the two men were not found.

But at last it was known that Dropshot Bluff of Red Eye, was this Mormon monster, and the men who had sworn allegiance to him, were ready to turn and take him back to Utah.

Grim George was dead, Thunder Tom had died by Vera's revolvers on the desperado's grave, but the chief perpetrator of the crime still lived.

Gold Gabe had warned his old master too late, and he had received death in return for his action. He lay under the alcalde's table, with the light of the little lamp touching his face—choked to death by the man he had served with a fidelity that deserved a better fate.

Dropshot Bluff looked like a desperado brought to bay, as he stood erect in his cabin, with the strange note crushed in his hand, and his eyes fixed on the door as if he expected to see his enemies burst in at any moment.

"When this sierra chick goes back ter Mormondom under guard, the stars will leave ther camps!" he said in audible tones. "So they call me Dave Dastard instead ov Dropshot Bluff, eh? I am ther exiled Mormon elder an' not the alcalde ov Red Eye! Very well! I accept the change ov name, but it shall not keep me from ther mouth ov ther lost Ophir. With ther map in my possession at last an' studied out, I hold ther best hand yet."

Five minutes passed away, but nobody came. The unmasked alcalde glanced at the warning again. It said that the mutineers would be at the cabin within ten minutes.

As the seconds wore away, the alcalde put out the lamp and took up a fresh revolver. "Now let them come," he said. "I might as well fight hyer as anywhar. Rattlin' Roy heads the mutiny, Gabe said. A cooler head couldn't do it, but I will match 'im!"

Meanwhile the mutineers were preparing to meet the man they had served so long.

"It war ther meanest crime ever perpetrated," said a well-built man of forty, who stood in the midst of the crowd that filled one of the largest cabins in the camp. "Gents, this is Red Eye with all its bad record, but bad as it is it shall harbor no man who, as a Mormon elder, wiped out ther family ov one ov Uncle Sam's officers. I am convinced thet Dropshot Bluff is Dave Dastard, ther hunted Mormon, an' hyer, regardless ov consequences, I break ther oath I once took for him. I am against him now, for when first I heard ov that terrible crime I went out among the sage brush an' swore ter avenge it if I had a chance, if it war fifty years afterward. Ther Federal major war nothin' ter me," the speaker went on. "It war Mormon ag'in' Gentile, an' when it comes ter thet, I'm Gentile from hat ter boots!"

A murmur of applause greeted the last sentence, and the dark-faced men moved toward the door.

"Hold!" the man went on. "If thar is a man hyer who wants ter serve ther cap'n as Dropshot Bluff, he shall hev thet chance. We force no man inter this game ag'in' his will. Ther scheme is ter take Dave Dastard back ter Utah an' ter throw him inter ther clutches ov ther Gentile League. Let all who stand by ther alcalde hold up ther right hand."

A minute's silence followed the speech, and not a hand was lifted.

"It is Utah with ther Mormon elder or bust!" Rattlin' Roy went on. "On no account is he ter be killed, it makes no difference what he does."

"But ther lost Ophir, Rattlin'," said a member of the group.

"Utah, first!" was the quick reply. "This is ther only thing that would make me desert Dropshot Bluff. He might be Satan himself, an' I'd serve him, but I can't serve Dave Dastard."

Two minutes later the occupants of the shanty went out into the starlight and waited for the command to march upon the alcalde's cabin.

"He hasn't got wind ov this," said Rattlin' Roy, in a low tone. "We will have him before he suspects ther truth. Remember what I have

said. We serve justice now—not Dropshot Bluff. Forward!”

The pards of Red Eye, or at least the greater portion of them, headed by Rattlin’ Roy, took up their march for the man who all the time fully warned and doubly armed, was quietly waiting for them in his cabin.

The crisis was at hand, and Red Eye Bar was about to witness events which a few days back seemed impossible ones.

It was a short walk to the alcalde’s cabin, and the quick ears of its cool tenant caught the tramp of the bronzed mutineers as they came down the one street behind the pistoled hand of Rattlin’ Roy.

“They’ll be surprised ter find me ready,” he murmured with a smile. “Ther ten minutes ar’ about up an’ they’re hyer on time.”

He heard the crowd halt in front of the cabin, and the next moment he was at the door.

“Hello!” he said opening it so abruptly that Rattlin’ Roy and his pards recoiled a step. “What’s ther news, boys?”

The mutineers exchanged looks.

There was nothin’ in Dropshot Bluff’s tones to indicate that he had been warned. They saw that he had no revolvers in his hand; it looked like attacking an enemy already at their mercy.

“Thar’s no news, cap’n,” said Rattlin’ Roy motioning to those behind him. “We want ter see yer on business.”

“In a minute.”

The big alcalde stepped back but his body was hardly out of sight when he reappeared.

“I am ready now,” he said so significantly that the mutineer’s glanced at his hands.

Yes, he was ready, for each hand held an enormous six-shooter, and his eyes were riveted on the crowd that confronted him.

“Yer business with me, men ov Red Eye. Spit it out!”

He stood in the door before them all, and leaned forward a little while he spoke with a leer of triumph on his swarthy face.

“I understand,” he went on, “that I am ter go back ter Utah under guard.”

A murmur of astonishment broke from the lips of one-half of Rattlin’ Roy’s backers.

“Betrayed!” exclaimed several unable to hold their tongues.

The alcalde laughed.

“Given away, an’ ther traitor lies dead under my table!” he said. “Ter you I am Dave Dastard, ther Mormon elder, who is ther most wanted man out o’ doors. I am ther man who got even with ther soldier. I am only Dropshot Bluff by name. Isn’t this about ther size ov ther charge, eh, Rattlin’ Roy?”

By this time the man who had headed the mutineers had recovered.

“Thet’s ther charge, cap’n,” he said. “Thar’s no crime hated by mankind like ther one thet once stirred ther Gentile part ov Mormondom. You ar’ Dave Dastard, ther head man in thet deed.”

“An’ you hev been his slaves!” cried the alcalde. “I hev been ready for this expose ever since I crossed ther boundary ov Utah with all mankind ag’in’ me. I am not unprepared now. What! go back thar under guard from Red Eye Bar? What d’yer take yer old alcalde for, boys?”

“Why resist, cap’n? We ar’ all ov one mind,” said Rattlin’ Roy. “This is Red Eye for justice. We ar’ Gentiles every one. Down with everything tainted with Mormonism!”

“Thet means me!” exclaimed the alcalde, coolly, and the next second his two revolvers leaped into the faces of the mutineers. “Go back ter yer shanties an’ let me play our gold game through for Red Eye.”

“Ophir be hanged!” answered Rattlin’ Roy. “Gilbert is dead, an’ ther secret is lost forever. Don’t try ter buck all Red Eye, cap’n.”

“Yer won’t go, eh?” came over the alcalde’s lips like a last sentence.

“No!”

A second later the outstretched revolvers flashed in the faces of Rattlin’ Roy and his pards.

Men fell back with loud cries or staggered to one side without a groan.

“I meet the crisis when it comes,” said the man who did the shooting. “Thar’s one sierra chick who never goes back ter ther Gentile noose!”

The men scattered from before the death-dealing weapons of the mad alcalde. The shots rung throughout the camp and came back from the mountain attended by many weird echoes.

A dozen men rushed to the scene from different parts of Red Eye, and paused amazed before the desperado who handled the revolvers.

“When I am trod upon I’m once more Dave Dastard!” he said in hisses to the thunderstruck group that looked on from a short distance away. “This is ther second play ov ther hand thet trumped ther Gentile ace in Mormondom. Ther men lyin’ thar hev made their own graves. If Rattlin’ Roy could speak, he would regret thet he wanted ter escort me back.”

The last shot had been fired, and the alcalde had stepped from his cabin with the hot revolvers in his hands.

Even the group still true to him drew back. He had admitted his identity, and Dropshot

Bluff from that hour must be the hunted Mormon elder.

“I hold no man ter his oath,” he went on. “You swore ter reach ther lost bonanza with Dropshot Bluff. You will never find it with Dave Dastard for your captain. Gentlemen, we dissolve partnership forever. I bid farewell ter Red Eye ter-night.”

He waved one of the revolvers toward the speechless group and stepped aside, but with his eyes fixed upon them.

“We may hunt yer, cap’n,” said a voice.

“All right!” was the answer. “Before you throw yerselves upon my trail look at ther six men lyin’ thar—all shot between ther eyes! Once more I feel like my old self. I’ve got ther world ag’in’ me! But for all that I’ll get ter ther end ov ther original gold game in prime condition. Dave Dastard is once more on top!”

Nobody stepped forward to intercept the alcalde’s retreat. The silent group saw the half-lifted revolvers and stood spellbound.

“They waked up ther wrong animal,” laughed the stalwart man who walked off. “I’m not much ov a saint when I’ve got on my fightin’ garments. Ef Vera ther Sorceress war hyer she’d regret thet she took Grim George an’ Thunder Tom, an’ spared ther biggest devil in ther deck.”

He walked toward the mountains behind the dark cabins, leaving a swearing group of men inspecting six figures that lay in the starlight. His eyes still flashed and his teeth seemed to bite off the words as if he hated them.

Once he stopped and whirled toward Red Eye with a furious oath.

“Why not go back an’ give ther hull camp ter ther wolf an’ ther vulture?” he exclaimed. “I kin take ’em by surprise an’ finish ther job. With Red Eye uninhabited, I could hunt for Floss without fear ov molestation, an’ arter thet march straight ter ther closed gates ov Ophir.”

He was on the eve of going back to camp. The alcalde felt himself a match for all the deadly revolvers there.

“I’ll go back as Dave Dastard,” he went on. “When they see me they’ll know that I’m playin’ ther second act.”

“Not while I’m hyer, cap’n,” said a voice behind him.

Dropshot Bluff turned before the sentence was completed, and just in time to see a figure leap forward like a mountain panther.

The next instant the two men met.

“Mebbe ye’ll not go back ter Red Eye,” the assailant went on. “Ye’ve fallen inter ther clutches ov a man who is ashamed ter say thet he’s been yer right-bower. Don’t yer know me, Cap’n Bluff?”

The big alcalde who had been forced back by the attack saw the face and the flashing eyes of the man in his front.

“You’ve got more lives than a cat,” he said.

“I discount a hull family ov felines,” was the reply accompanied by a laugh, and then the speaker raised his voice. “Come hyer, Kennard! I’ve caught ther shootin’ battery ov Red Eye, an’ by heavens! we’ll take vengeance for blood on ther boy.”

There was a light cry and a quick step in response to the summons and Dagger Johnny felt a hand on his arm.

“Hyar yer ar’,” he cried looking up. “By Jerusalem! Ken—In God’s name is it you?”

“Yes,” said a strange voice. “I am Vera the Viper, and Dave Dastard there knows my mission!”

CHAPTER XXXI

OUT OF THE FIRE.

“Look! the whole mountain-side is on fire!”

“In God’s name who did that?”

“I cannot tell.”

The person who spoke last was the young girl Floss, and the face into which she looked wore a black mask whose fringe fell to the mouth and almost concealed it.

The fire was that started by the blazing mass of pine cones dropped from the mountain summit by Keen Kennard in search of Gilbert, and in going back to that night we are only keeping track of several important characters of our romance.

Floss was still Queen Moro’s companion and prisoner, and she it was of the two who first discovered the fire which they had watched for some time.

They were below the flames which seemed to increase in violence as they spread rapidly, and, for some minutes after the girl’s last sentence no other words were spoken.

“I remember that I saw a meteor dart downward, as if from the top of the mountain,” said Floss at last. “It was some time before the fire burst forth. I happened to be looking up; but that did not start the flames.”

“It might have fallen from human hands,” Queen Moro replied.

“Who would fire the mountain, and for what purpose?”

“Heaven knows, but these sierra tigers will do anything. They are all on the famous gold trail, or think they are, and they will resort to any means to beat back their rivals. Ah! the fire is dying out. It has struck a green belt. Nature is fighting it now.”

It was even so as the masked mystery had spoken. There was no longer that fierceness about the fire which had characterized it until within the last few minutes, and Floss could see that it had suddenly met some formidable obstacle.

“We will move now,” said the woman. “Our path lies toward the fire-swept lands, and we may come in contact with the devils who applied the match.”

Stepping back from the trail on which they stood Queen Moro found two horses which she led forward by the bridles and told Floss to mount one.

The next instant the twain were moving over the trail slowly up the mountain and toward that portion where the fire still found something to feed upon, although its destroying strength was nearly spent.

“I would like to find these roasters out!” grated the Sacramento mystery, in tones not intended for the girl’s ears. “Maybe they are the men who hate me because I took Keen Kennard from them after the triangular duel. They may be trying to roast me out for my share in that fight. Fools! if they attempt that.”

The two females were not long reaching the region of smoke through which they were obliged to force themselves like blindfolded persons. Queen Moro’s left hand continued to grasp Floss’s bridle, though at times she could not see her beautiful captive.

All at once the masked woman uttered a startling exclamation, and Floss felt her bridle violently jerked and then released.

Her own horse stood still and a nameless thrill shot through her frame. What had become of Queen Moro?

The thick smoke had settled down upon the spot like a heavy pall, and the blackness of darkness surrounded the girl. She covered her face with her hands at times and gasped for breath.

For several moments this terrible state of affairs continued, and the girl’s repeated efforts could not urge the horse forward one step.

“Where are you, Queen Moro?” she asked, in audible yet cautious tones. “In Heaven’s name, tell me what has happened?”

To these words there was no response. Floss ceased to urge her horse forward; she might stand upon the brink of some chasm into which Queen Moro had disappeared.

At last the curtain of smoke began to lift, the air became less disagreeable, and Floss was happy to breathe freely again. But she was still in an unpleasant situation, and alone.

A wind finally drove the smoke away, and, far above, the girl could see the last torches of the mountain fire.

Then again she called on her companion but her calls remained unanswered as before. Puzzled beyond description, Floss dismounted and moved ahead on foot.

By degrees she was enabled to see her way in the light of the stars, but her progress was slow, for she was on the lookout for that chasm into which she believed Queen Moro had fallen.

All at once the young girl came to a halt and then fell back with a light cry escaping her lips.

“As I feared!” she ejaculated. “I am alone!”

To all appearances the trail had come to an end and at a spot but a few feet from her halting-place, Floss looked over the brink and saw a yawning chasm of darkness, but its depths her eyes could not fathom. Past it wound the trail she had been following, but the sharp cry suddenly uttered by Queen Moro amid the stifling smoke told her that the woman of mystery had been one of the unfortunates.

“There is another vengeance that will never be carried out,” murmured the girl as she made her way back to her horse. “The mask will be torn off by the vultures, and no human eye will gaze upon the branded face of the Sacramento mystery. Now, what am I to do? I am lost. I know not the trail back to Red Eye Bar, and why should I go there if I did? Dropshot Bluff is there. Duncan who took me from the camp may be hunting me now, but I am not destined to feel his protecting arm again. Merciful heavens! what am I to do? Gilbert, Gilbert! all this for you! My bitterest enemy would be welcomed now!”

The terrible situation and the ghostly surroundings unnerved the girl. She reached her steed and fell against him, trembling the while, and for the moment confronted by despair. By this time she could see no fire up the mountain. The last spark had seemingly been extinguished, and where the flames had raged with fury was now the gloom of night.

A light breeze that afforded plenty of good air was playing with the boughs above her, but that could not cheer the girl.

“Which way—up or down?” she suddenly cried. “I am more than half bewildered. I must wait for daylight on the mountain, then whither?—heaven knows!”

She took the bridle and led her horse up the trail. She shuddered when she passed the precipice over which she believed Queen Moro had tumbled headlong, and her steed kept close to the wall opposite.

On the very summit of the mountain, if she could but reach it, Floss believed she would be less liable to interruption till morning. The fire had probably burned over it, and nothing dangerous would be found there.

"If this is the heart of the sierra, Heaven take me from it," she exclaimed.

She continued to move upward until she reached the fringe of the fire. Her horse sniffed the atmosphere and drew back, and but for Floss's presence of mind he would have left her alone on the mountain.

All at once the girl heard a noise that thrilled her.

"That was a human voice," she exclaimed while she listened for a repetition of the sound. "Have I encountered some of those men whom Queen Moro hates so cordially?"

For several minutes no sounds were repeated. The girl did not move.

"Thank Heaven! I am out of this scorched wood at last!" said a voice so near that the girl retreated as if the speaker had suddenly risen from the ground before her.

Then she stood like a statue beside her horse, and waited for the next move. It was the most thrilling moment in Floss's life.

"I've heard of miracles but I never thought that I would be the subject of one," continued the same voice. "When the ground crumbled under my feet, I thought I was lost. The alcalde of Red Eye will have to hunt again for Gilbert!"

Floss uttered a wild cry which it would have been impossible to keep back. At the same time she dropped the bridle rein and sprung forward.

"Gilbert! thank fortune!" pealed from her lips. She heard a voice in response: "It is Floss!"

A figure sprung into view from among the trees, and the girl found herself clutched by a pair of hands whose touch sent a thrill to her heart.

"Let me draw you into the starlight that I may look at you," exclaimed the young man, and suiting the action to the words he pulled Floss forward with a laugh. "Yes, he continued looking into her face. "Yes, you are Max Mongalle's child. You are Floss! Now they can take their gold mine and share its wealth. I will give the secret away to the first man I meet."

The girl stood before the youth in a bewildered manner. The unexpected meeting seemed to daze her.

"I saw the fire," she said. "We both saw it—"

"Ah! the fire!" interrupted Gilbert. "It followed one of the most terrible events of my life. I fell into the hands of the alcalde of Red Eye and his pards. Keen Kennard and I were together, and when we expected no surprise we were covered by the revolvers of the gang and forced to surrender. We were separated. I was conducted by Dropshot Bluff in person to the very summit of the mountain. Heaven knows where Kennard was taken, and what his fate. The alcalde wanted the gold secret—that secret for which the men of Red Eye banded themselves together years ago. He saw his opportunity again. Unfortunate Gilbert Golden was in his hands."

"Marched to the mountain-top, I was pushed to the brink of the summit and forced to stand there while I was dogged at the revolver's muzzle for the secret which at that time had completely escaped me. I could tell the desperadoes nothing; it was not in my power. All at once I felt the ground give way beneath my feet. I fell down, down, down!"

"My God!" cried Floss, excitedly.

"May that terrible descent never be repeated!" ejaculated Gilbert. "Consciousness left me before I struck in the heavy top of a pine which, determined to save me for another fate, broke my fall, and lowered me to a tree still below it, where, weak and bruised, I lay, until sensibility returned. I could not move without racking my body with torture. It was most terrible. Suddenly I saw a light far above my position. Nearer and nearer it came, and I saw a fiery object hissing through the air, and saw it alight in a dry tree near by. In a moment, as it were, the great fire began. The long tongues of flame darted hither and thither, till I was menaced. Filled with horror, I tried to reach the body of the tree, but the bough that supported me broke suddenly, and I fell again. This time it was a fall from limb to limb by easy stages, as it seemed, till I struck the ground. The whole mountain seemed on fire overhead, and burning cones fell about me in fiery showers. Bruised and bewildered, I staggered hither and thither until, after encountering a thousand perils among the flames, I reached the limit of the fire."

"Who threw the fire-ball down?" asked Floss.

"I do not know; the alcalde of Red Eye, perhaps," was the reply. "There is a day of reckoning for that sierra demon, Floss—a day of vengeance which I have sworn anew he shall not escape!"

"Little did I think, when I saw the fire-ball shoot like a meteor from the mountain-top, that you were so near, and in such terrible peril," said the girl.

"I believe I would endure it again to find you," was the answer. "Some other time I will

tell you about the trail to the fabulous mine that cost your father his life and me years of insanity. We will not talk of that now, Floss. When Dropshot Bluff saw me disappear from before his eyes I was not in possession of the gold secret, but the fall, the excitement that followed, restored it in a flash, as it were."

Floss could not repress an exclamation. "It is all back again," continued Gilbert, "and while I have it I will draw the map and let the secret be yours as well as mine; but I am willing to give it to the first trailer we meet save the demon of Red Eye Bar."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE FALSE KNOTS.

THE alcalde of Red Eye was no less astounded than Dagger Johnny when he looked up into the face of Vera the Viper.

Dagger Johnny's attack had been sudden and irresistible, and Dropshot Bluff had not recovered when he saw the sorceress of Red Eye standing near.

"Yes," continued Vera, "this man, Dave Dastard, knows my mission!"

The eyes of the alcalde flashed.

"I ought to know it by this time," he said. "Arter the deaths ov Grim George an' Thunder Tom, I ought to have my eyes open. You ar' ther soldier's daughter."

"I am Edna the Gentile," was the reply, spoken through almost closed lips. "My years of sojourn in Red Eye as its sorceress were but a part of my scheme of vengeance. I made certain of you and your two pards in time."

"If I had known it there would have been another game played in that camp."

"No doubt of that," smiled Vera, her eyes twinkling. "But the day of retribution has come at last. Dagger Johnny, this man belongs to me."

The exiled pard shook his head.

"That's ter be seen," he said between his teeth. "I hev been banished by ther law he made—"

"Stand back and give me this man!" interrupted Vera, and her hand seized Dagger Johnny's arm. "You expect help from Keen Kennard the Shasta Sleuth. He will not give you any. Stand back, I say!"

The Red Eye pard looked into the woman's face and stepped back with the sullenness of a beaten desperado.

Dropshot Bluff found himself unarmed, for Dagger Johnny's first care when he made the attack, was to deprive his enemy of his weapons, and Vera stepped coolly between the pair as she uttered the last command.

"Face to the north," she continued, speaking to the alcalde.

Dropshot Bluff bit his mustache, and hesitated.

"My mission is death, and I am not particular when I end it," she went on, covering the boss of Red Eye with a revolver. "Disobey me, and you will die where you stand, Dave Dastard; obey, and you will have a chance."

There was a mad look, but no reply, and Dropshot Bluff faced to the north.

"Tie that man's hands on his back," she went on, to Dagger Johnny. "You are never without a cord. I have watched your characteristics in camp."

"I will do that, but under protest, mind yer," said the exile stepping forward.

Vera laughed, and watched Dagger Johnny carry out her commands, under the threat of the silver-mounted weapon that covered him.

"I'm goin' ter give yer a chance, cap'n," whispered Dagger Johnny, while he placed the cord he had taken from his pocket. "This woman has no more right ter get even with yer than I hev. I don't give yer this chance because I like yer; heavens, no! I do it ter give Dagger Johnny a chance ter git even for ther banishment in ther hereafter."

Dropshot Bluff made no reply, but a vivid glitter came to his eyes while he felt the cords placed about his wrists.

"If this fool gives me a chance, I'll owe him one," he said to himself. "Give me an opportunity to meet this woman squarely, an' I'll complete ther work left unfinished in Mormondom!"

The operation of tying the alcalde's hands upon his back did not last long.

"I've made a false knot thet would deceive ther best eyes," whispered Dagger Johnny. "All yer hev ter do is ter jerk yer left hand first. Ther cords will fall off, an' ye'll be free."

"A thousand thanks," murmured the boss of Red Eye.

Dagger Johnny stepped back and waved his hand toward Dropshot Bluff, as he faced the female avenger.

"Thar he stands, tied for keeps," he said. "I don't consider yer game a fair one agin' ther one I am playin'; but no difference, Vera. Thar's yer man!"

Still clutching the revolver, the sorceress of Red Eye stepped forward and looked at the cords. She saw nothing of Dagger Johnny's treachery, for the shrewd ruffian had performed his work in a manner to deceive the keenest eyes.

"Forward," she said to the alcalde, as she

stepped back, apparently satisfied with the exile's work.

"Thet's not ther way ter Utah" exclaimed Dagger Johnny.

Vera threw him a quick glance.

"The trail may end there," she said, with a faint smile. "I want no interference by your hand, Dagger Johnny. The man before me is the last of the Mormon trio, and the hand that attempts to rescue him, will be left for the vultures' beaks in the sierra!"

Dropshot Bluff had already obeyed the command of the sorceress by moving forward, and Dagger Johnny was left alone on the spot where he had surprised the big alcalde.

"Thet's about ther coolest interference I ever heard of," he said. "That woman has a way ov turnin' up when she isn't wanted, thet fails ter please a chap like me. If Kennard an' I had kept together on our advance upon Red Eye, ther alcalde would be my prisoner now, instead ov in Vera's hands. Just wait till he shows her what a half-tied man kin do. Hang me fer a snake! ef I war goin' ter let her get ahead ov me, just because Dropshot, as Dave Dastard, played a game once ag'in' her in Utah! My time must come yet. Cap'n Bluff once left me for dead on the floor ov his cabin. I want blood for thet trick!"

Meanwhile, the alcalde of Red Eye was walking up the rather wide trail, a few feet in advance of the avenger from Mormondom. The night was still, and the brilliant moon that stood directly over the path, showed the two persons every tree and rock.

Inwardly, Dropshot Bluff was chafing like a tiger. He was impatient to try the effect of Dagger Johnny's tying; he could hardly bide his time without betraying his eagerness.

"Mebbe ther famous liar ov Red Eye has deceived me," he muttered. "A short time ago he was seeking my life in camp; now he prepares the way for my release, he says. I don't trust Dagger Johnny very far. He is a liar from the ground up. But if he has made false knots—if he has told the truth for once, I'll show the lioness at my heels a trick that will discount the game I played in Utah."

Vera the Viper watched the man in front with a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes.

This was the last of the infamous trio, this was Dave Dastard, the hunted Mormon elder, the man of many crimes and many names, the wretch who had fled from Mormondom with red hands, to gather about him a band of reckless as himself—whose life-hunt was to be the lost mine, which might, after all, be a myth.

For more than two miles the alcalde of Red Eye marched with grated teeth in front of the woman from Utah.

A thousand plans of attack were formed and abandoned. He did not know how to turn the tables, and yet his fingers itched to clutch the throat of the avenger.

The gold map next to his skin seemed to burn him like a piece of heated iron. He had found the secret at last; but now he was a condemned man; he had been hunted down by Vera the Viper known to him as Edna the avenger.

"Confound it all! I must make the break!" he suddenly ejaculated. "The tread of that woman sounded on my ears like the grinding ov hell's doors. What better place will I ever find than this?"

The next instant he wheeled and faced Vera the sorceress. She stepped back a pace amazed, and gave him a stern look.

"Am I goin' ter Utah?" he asked.

"Why not?" was the response. "Why not back to the noose of the Gentile League, Dave Dastard?"

"But it is disbanded, I hear."

"The noose remains, and my hand is ready to adjust it."

Dropshot Bluff stepped forward and sent a ringing laugh into the woman's face.

"It is a long way to Mormondom," he said. "To make sure of vengeance don't you think you had better end ther trail hyer?"

"No! To Utah!"

"Afoot?"

"You shall see."

"I want to see ef you really mean business," said the alcalde moving nearer to the avenger. "I want ter look in ter ther eyes ov ther Gentile major's child. A man with his hands tied behind him ain't no tiger, Vera. I see yer father's features in yer face now. Fool I war notter see it while you played sorceress at Red Eye!"

Scarcely five feet separated the twain while the alcalde spoke. Vera had instinctively recoiled, but he was leaning forward and laughing derisively after his last sentence.

All at once he straightened and then tried the cords.

They parted as Dagger Johnny said they would, and as his hands appeared in front of him the avenger from Mormondom recoiled again this time with a startling cry!

"After this, shoot yer enemies on sight!" he roared. "I'm a reg'lar double-breasted thunderbolt when I get started. Now it shall not be Utah!"

He cleared the space between Vera and himself by a tremendous bound, he knocked down the arm that lifted the revolver and in less than

a second had the woman from the South in his arms.

"Goin' ter Mormondom with Dave Dastard, eh?" he exclaimed. "When I poke my head into the Gentile noose ther stars will turn ter comets! No, my tigress, Dagger Johnny never knew how ter tie a man ter stay."

Vera did not struggle much. Biting her lips she looked up into the alcalde's face, and made no reply.

He had already shaken the revolver from her hand, and now he held her out at arm's length and laughed triumphantly in her face.

"Your time, not mine, has come!" he cried. "Dave Dastard ther Mormon elder finishes hyer ther work he an' his pards failed ter do in Utah! Thar is no escape, woman. Grim George an' Thunder Tom shall be avenged by ther last ov ther three. Let me whisper in yer ear thet I have at last ther secret ov ther big bonanza, thet I have solved ther puzzle. I go from hyer ter ther lost mine, an' when Dropshot Bluff turns up ag'in away from hyer he will be a gold nabob with nobody alive bold enough ter throw ther name Dave Dastard inter his face."

Still not a word from the woman in his clutches.

"I'll serve yer as I served Gold Gabe who lies dead under my table!" he went on. "Never trust a pard ter tie his old captain's hands. It is poor policy, Viper Vera!"

He lifted the woman from the trail as he snapped out the last words with bits of triumphant laughter, and sprung with her into an opening like a huge crack in the mountain to the right.

"Won't yer ask for mercy?" he said.

"From Dave Dastard? I'll die first!" exclaimed the avenger.

"Very well, then; die it shall be!"

The narrow pass swallowed up the pair, but from it soon came a cry which ended suddenly as if the hand of man had shut it off.

"So much for one woman!" said Dropshot Bluff as he emerged from the place a minute later. "Choked an' thrown inter a chasm as deep as ther pit under cabin number four, ought ter keep one serpent out o' my way. I owe Dagger Johnny one for ther knots he made. Oh, I'm bound ter play this game c'lar through an' ter reach ther lost Ophir with a full hand! When I am nabob an' boss ov ther big bonanza, I'll masquerade among ther Gentile League, but not as Dave Dastard ther Mormon elder. No! By Jerusalem! thet character would hardly do thar!"

He stood in the trail and laughed for a moment, then with Vera's revolver in his hand, he started south, toward Red Eye.

If he had looked back he might have seen a figure on his trail, almost at his very heels at times.

The trails of the sierra are not cold long at one time. When man hunts man in the mountains, he is always on hand; he tracks by starlight as well as through the light of day.

Dropshot Bluff seemed destined to lead his trailer to the famous camp, but it was not likely that he was going back to the men who had risen in mutiny against Dave Dastard.

"Hyer I strike the gold path!" he exclaimed, aloud, halting suddenly where another trail seemed to cross the one he trod. "Dropshot Bluff, ye ar' at last in luck. You hold ther key to Ophir!"

He plunged forward and disappeared. His tracker did the same, and the shadows of the pines hid both from the glittering stars.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TRACKING THE SECRET DOWN.

MORE than once during the next twelve hours did the big alcalde of Red Eye consult the diagram found on his table upon his return to camp.

He had surely fathomed the mystery of the lost mine if the map was correct, and he firmly believed that it had been correctly drawn.

The morning of another day broke and found him still among the mountains, but the person who had tracked him during the night had disappeared.

Dropshot Bluff believed that he was now on the way to the lost bonanza, and that, with Red Eye behind him, and with nobody to share the secret, fathomed at last.

"Let them circumvent me now, if they can!" he exclaimed. "I hold ther coldest deck ever held in ther sierra kentry, an' woe ter ther person, man or woman, who attempts ter beat it!"

What had become of the alcalde's tracker of the night before?

If Dropshot Bluff had gone back with the stealth of a wild animal, he might have seen a person who would have called forth an ejaculation of amazement.

Walking slowly over the trail which here and there showed the alcalde's tracks, appeared a woman who wore a dark mask, behind which shone a pair of glittering eyes.

Queen Moro!

Afoot now, she was still on the trail of the lost mine, and if she had lost the Red Eye rough in the starlight, she was still surely on his track.

There was something terribly persistent about this strange woman who wanted wealth to carry out a revenge. She had followed Keen Ken-

nard from Sacramento, she had invaded the heart of the sierra, determined to find first the hidden gold, and then to turn upon some one whom she hated with all her nature.

The sun came up and passed down the western slope of the heavens to disappear again.

The alcalde of Red Eye Bar believed that he stood on the threshold of the enormous fortune hunted so long and so persistently. Vera the Viper was behind him—dead. Red Eye had been faced and riddled with the revolver, and he—Dave Dastard, the Mormon elder—was the winner in the gold game.

Concealed in a pass, he waited for the stars to show themselves.

A critical examination of the map told him that he had surely reached the solution of the labyrinth. He was waiting for darkness to take the last step.

Above him rose the sloping side of a mountain on one hand, and on the other a perpendicular wall strangely seamed as if by the action of water.

The alcalde stood in the shadow of this wall, his body well concealed and his eyes beaming with eagerness.

Night never came so slowly to the boss of Red Eye before. The long summer day seemed to linger beyond its allotted time, and the tardy stars came out one by one as if the heavens had lost some of its lights.

"I can walk straight to it now," said Dropshot Bluff. "Thar's not ther least doubt about thet. I hev solved ther map, an' hyer I am at ther mouth ov ther lost bonanza. I didn't hev ter choke it out o' Gilbert arter all, I didn't hev ter shoot it from any one else. It dropped inter my lap like a ripe plum, an' when I warn't expectin' it. What if Red Eye hed found ther map afore I came back? Thet would hev been a bad find for me—but Red Eye didn't find it."

He laughed and waited on for the night, and it came at last.

Dropshot Bluff moved cautiously from his place of concealment. He had the eyes of the hawk, and seemed to know just where to go.

A few rods down the trail he suddenly left it and struck into a bridle path that took him into the mountain.

"It's somewhar hyar," he said, pausing where three boulders lay one piled upon the others, undoubtedly the work of man.

He crouched behind the stones and took out the map. It was too dark to see the diagram now, and he had recourse to a match which showed him the lines.

"I am hyer!" he exclaimed, throwing the match away. "Twenty steps from these stones in this direction," and he started off, counting the steps he took.

When he stopped again he was touching a pile of rocks which had been gathered from the mountain. The largest was not larger than a man's head.

The next moment Dropshot Bluff fell to removing the heap one by one, and the stones made strange noises as they fell here and there from his hands.

Half an hour's work revealed a dark hole large enough to receive the body of a man and the alcalde rested with a satisfied look on his face.

At last!

The aperture seemed to lead into the mountain-side and the whole surroundings suggested a lost gold mine.

Dropshot Bluff dropped on his knees and looked into the cavernous opening. He thought of Gilbert Golden and his companions who years before had discovered the rich lead which had proved so disastrous to the party. He recalled the youth's story of the search, and the terrible sufferings of the little band.

Springing to his feet at length, he gathered a lot of pine cones and formed them into a torch with which he went back to the opening.

Ten minutes later Dropshot Bluff was crawling through gloom in a narrow corridor whose ceiling and side walls he could touch with his hands.

At length he reached a spot where he could stand erect and the torch came in play. Holding it above his head, he made the circuit of a little chamber which had been hollowed out by human hands years before. The walls bore the marks of picks, and the floor was strewn with dark-colored rocks and dirt.

The man from Red Eye inspected every part of the chamber. He ran his torch along the walls and picked up some of the rocks at his feet.

All at once an exclamation of discovery parted his lips.

"Thar seems ter be no discount on this!" he cried. "I am in Ophir at last, an' when I go back ter civilization as ther gold king, I'll play some hands that'll astonish the natives."

"So will I," said a voice.

Dropshot Bluff dropped the nugget and wheeled.

"You?" he cried, stepping back, with his eyes riveted upon the person who confronted him.

"Why not?" was the answer, accompanied by a laugh which the rough from Red Eye did not like. "Well, Dropshot Bluff, you have found Gilbert's lost gold-mine, and so have I."

The alcalde started forward with grated teeth, but a shapely hand waved him back.

"Not till we have compromised," said the same voice, which possessed a silvery sound which under other circumstances would have been pleasing to the alcalde.

"Compromise over this bonanza?" cried Dropshot Bluff.

"Perhaps; certainly, if, upon examination, I find it big enough for two."

The big alcalde saw only the two eyes that glittered behind the silk mask, while his con-fronter spoke.

He faced Queen Moro, and she was the tracker who had followed him to the bonanza.

"I compromise with no woman who is ashamed to show her face," he said. "I have found the lost Ophir without yer help. It belongs ter Dropshot Bluff, an' by ther eternal Heavens! he works it as it suits him best. Show me thet face, however, an' mebbe we'll talk."

For a moment there was no reply.

"I show nothing till the time comes, and it is not yet here," the woman said. "I have played my last hand for Gilbert's secret. I have found it. My vengeance ground now is San Francisco, and there I strike my last blow."

"Ag'in' ther men what branded yer on ther face, eh?"

"Who told you?" cried Queen Moro, starting.

"Never mind. I know."

"Yes. I strike the men who marked me hideously for life," cried the woman. "You would start back and shudder were I to lift the accursed mask I have worn so long. The men who marked me thus have wealth at their command. I must have wealth to fight them as I want to. I sent Keen Kennard into this country to find this mine for future vengeance. His delay put me upon the trail in person. I am here."

"By follerin' me," added Dropshot.

"I admit it—by following you!" was the reply. "What is the prospect? Is the game worth the candle?"

"Do you know gold when you see it?"

"I ought to; I was raised in a mine, almost."

The alcalde of Red Eye picked up one of the nuggets at his feet and tossed it to Queen Moro. Then he thrust the torch forward that she might inspect it.

He saw her eyes suddenly shine more intensely than before as she turned the rock over and over in her hand.

"It is gold!" she said, looking up into his face.

"Wal, I should remark!" was the answer. "Ther marks ov Gilbert's pick ar' on these walls. This is Ophir, woman."

"Give me the torch!"

The torch was snatched from his hand, and the next minute he was looking at Queen Moro as she moved it along the wall, which her eyes scrutinized with great eagerness.

"Jove! what a chance ter balk her!" suddenly muttered the Red Eye boss. "She tracked me hyer; she has been my sleuth. May I roast in Tartarus if I divide one ounce with this hidden and branded face ov Sacramento!" and he followed in her path like a leopard after its prey.

"Playing panther, eh?" exclaimed the woman whirling upon him. "In your estimation this find is too big to divide, Dave Dastard. So be it! I share that opinion with you. To break and drive to ruin the nabobs who marked Queen Moro for life, she must have it all!"

The blazing torch flashed in his face, and he uttered a sharp oath as she forced him back.

"It is too big to share, Dave Dastard!" she cried again. "I have endured too much to throw a part of it to you!"

Down came the heavy, scathing torch once, twice, three times in swift succession upon the alcalde's uplifted hands. The attack seemed to have the fury of a tornado in it.

The fire blinded him, the blaze beating across his face set him in a rage; he staggered back bewildered, howled, and cried for mercy!

Once more the novel weapon descended; the torch seemed to beat out his very eyes!

Dropshot went to the wall with a despairing cry; he fell against it, and then sunk at its foot.

"Ha, ha! there's too much here to share with you," and she stooped over his blackened face and held the torch down that she might inspect it. "I can now muster my miners, and when I go back to the cities I will begin the game of a woman's vengeance."

Of course there was no answer, for the man from Red Eye was unconscious, if not dead, and Queen Moro went back.

"This is better than falling over a little precipice and losing Floss, my enemy's kin!" she laughed, with almost a fiend's triumph, while she moved toward the mouth of the cavern. "I can find the girl again if I want her, but I have the gold bonanza in my hands, and I will work it first. Good-by Dropshot. I don't think you will ever go to Mormondom with Vera the Viper."

The torch had been extinguished by Queen Moro before she reached the starlight, and a few minutes later she was collecting the small boulders which had concealed the mouth of the mine and piling them back in their old places.

Having accomplished the work, she turned

away with an ejaculation of satisfaction, but paused a few yards from the spot.

"Let me see; what is the next move now?" she said, aloud. "It is a long trail back to the men I can trust, but it must be taken. They will open up this mine for me, but my hand must not appear in it. The gold nabobs of 'Frisco must not suspect that I own the long-lost Ophir. Oh! you devils in broadcloth! the day of vengeance has dawned! Queen Moro will soon stand over you with the mask taken from her face; then the work—my work—will be done."

She started down the mountain-side and, over the trail lately traveled by the man she had left behind in darkness, if not in death.

Nothing seemed to tire that persistent vengeance-hunter. The stars went down and the winds of approaching morn fanned her cheeks. Still she kept on.

For a long distance she hurried over a trail, which, if closely followed in all its deviations would land her in Red Eye; but she turned aside at a certain place, as if she knew the way.

Morning came and found Queen Moro resting at last. The daylight as it penetrated the mountain coves, fell upon her well-molded figure and the black mask.

Half awake, she leaned against a pine with her face still toward the West. A few feet away the trail turned abruptly. Suddenly the Sacramento mystery started up, and laid her hand upon the revolver within easy reach.

"Don't draw that shooter," said a rough voice as four men stepped into view. "We hold ther drop on yer, Queen Moro, an' we propose ter see under that bit o' black! It is Red Eye's boom ag'in. Lift yer mask, woman, or by ther heavens above! we'll shoot it away!"

Queen Moro did not lift a hand.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NEMESIS.

THE silence of half a minute followed the last sentence of the man from Red Eye. Queen Moro found herself faced by men who looked over their leveled weapons with the cool eyes of practiced desperadoes.

"This is a desperate game," the leader went on. "We started out ter find Dave Dastard, known ter us for years as Dropshot Bluff, but we hev found you with yer infernal mask on. Take it off, or we will proceed ter handle ther trigger in a fatal manner!"

"Not for you," said the woman calmly. "I lift my mask before the men I have sworn to ruin. Men of Red Eye, you can shoot!" Kill me where I stand and never know the fate of the hunted Mormon elder."

"Do you know it?" asked the eager toughs.

"Ay, that I do."

"Whar is he?"

"Where I trust the feet of a Red Eye pard will never tread!" was the answer.

The men exchanged meaning glances.

"Won't yer tell, Queen Moro?"

"No!"

"Then take yer kivered face away. Hang me ef I'll shoot a woman after all. Keep cl'ar ov Red Eye. Ther old camp ar' deserted now, an' ther cabins ar' blackened logs."

"You fired the camp?"

"Burnt it up! We hed ter wipe out ther taint ov Dave Dastard's name in some manner, so we gave Red Eye ther match! Woe ter ther man himself ef he falls inter our hands!"

The woman smiled and said nothing.

"Keep yer trail," the desperado went on. "Stand aside, boys, and let ther Sacramento witch pass by."

The men who had lowered their revolvers stepped to one side, and straightened against the rocky wall of the mountain trail.

Queen Moro looked into the eyes of each as she came on but no words were spoken.

The leader of the little band waved her a mute farewell, and that was all, but the men watched her until she had passed out of sight.

"Forward!" cried the leader. "We shall find Dave Dastard if the mountains hev ter be scoured from top ter base! Forward!"

With eager exclamations the men sprung forward again, watched by a young couple who from a spot above the trail had witnessed the halt and the release.

"The roughs of Red Eye, Floss," said the young man who looked into the face of the fair girl at his side.

"Those men have never really hated me. I am going to get rid of this accursed gold secret which has been the bane of my life. They have hunted for it long enough. Come!"

Several minutes later the roughs of Red Eye were suddenly confronted by Gilbert and Floss and all showed their great surprise.

"If you will follow me I will lead you straight to the doors of Ophir," said the youth. "I said I would throw the secret at the feet of the first men I met, and my resolution shall be kept."

"Sail in, Gilbert," was the reply; "but remember that we want no fool game now."

The long shadows were falling once more when the young gold-hunter halted at the pile of boulders on the side of the mountain, and turned to the men who had patiently followed him.

"Here is what you have hunted for ever since I came back to Gold Gorge Camp nearly starved and insane," he said. "These stones cover the entrance to the lost bonanza. It is all plain to me again; the route is in my head as vivid as the day I drew it, before the fever and the delirium came."

The men of Red Eye set up a wild shout of ecstasy and began to throw the stones hither and thither, while Gilbert Golden and Floss stepped back and looked on.

In a short time the mouth of the corridor stood revealed, and one of the roughs who was about to enter, drew back with a startling cry.

"The place is inhabited!" he exclaimed. "By Jupiter! thar's a human bein' in thar!"

Gilbert stepped forward with a laugh.

"That mine has not been opened since we left it," he said.

"But it's inhabited now, all the same. Somebody else go in. I'd sooner crawl under ther blazin' wall ov hades."

Gilbert Golden dropped before the entrance himself.

"I'll go in," he said, fearlessly; and the next moment he had disappeared.

Several seconds passed away, while the pards of Red Eye listened, and then came a loud cry from the corridor.

"Haunted!" cried the roughs, drawing back.

All at once Gilbert Golden fell half-way out of the hole, muttering a name that startled all.

"Dropshot Bluff!"

In an instant half a dozen revolvers were thrust into the opening, and dark fingers seemed to press the triggers.

"If the man in there is the alcalde of Red Eye, you shoot on your peril!" a voice said.

The men wheeled instantly and saw the tall figure of Keen Kennard, the Shasta Sleuth, in the narrow trail.

Their revolvers instantly fell.

"I speak for a person who has an indisputable right to Dave Dastard," continued the gold detective. "She cannot be here just now on account of a fall she recently sustained at the hands of that man."

"Vera?"

"Edna Boynton, as she must now be called. The Gentile League has passed out of existence, but her hunt has never lagged. I am no woman's champion now, but I say that Dave Dastard, if he is in that cavern, shall be turned over to the huntress from Mormondom!"

"She shall have him," was the reply of the band. "Vera the sorceress shall deal with the demon who deserves more than death. We'll bring him out!"

There was no need of this, strange to say, for at that moment one of the most hideous of human faces ever seen appeared at the opening and every person recoiled.

"In heaven's name, where is this merciless Gentile girl?" said the man at the hole. "I am Dave Dastard. I am blind!"

"Blind!" echoed half a dozen men.

"My eyes are on fire yet. They were burned out by the infernal torch of the demoness from Sacramento, Queen Moro! I am sufferin' a thousand deaths. Lead me ter ther Yankee major's child, and tell her to give me the contents of her revolver. But first, if you can, stand this masked witch before me and let me leap straight at her throat. This is ther long-lost El Dorado; this is Gilbert's famous mine; but heavens! it is death ter me!"

Strong arms held the sightless desperado whose face showed the terrible work of Queen Moro's torch, and Keen Kennard walked away.

"Wait for me," he said.

Twenty minutes afterward he reappeared accompanied by a man and a woman who rode the same horse, the woman pale but brilliant-eyed, supported by her dark-faced companion.

"Dagger Johnny an' Vera!" exclaimed several of the pards.

From the first the eyes of the Mormon huntress were fixed on Dropshot Bluff, and when the horse was reined in before him he started forward.

"Hyer I am, helpless—blind—dyin' a thousand deaths!" he cried. "I am ther Mormon elder who planned it all. I am Dave Dastard who, because your mother refused to leave her husband for him, shot your father first, an' then at night burned the house over his head with his family bound within it. That was Mormonism, Edna; but ah! you know it. You have settled with Thunder Tom and Grim George, my pards that night; deal now with me!"

The men looked at Vera the beautiful sorceress and drew back expecting to see her drop the blind wretch in his tracks.

"Not yet," she said. "Eager as my hand is to inflict vengeance, I hold it back. You must go to Utah, to the scene of your infamous crime, Dave Dastard—to the home of the Gentile League!"

The man shrunk away with a shudder.

"No, no! Kill me now—where I stand!" he cried.

"Not for the world," said the avenger. "Blood for blood where blood was shed!"

Dave Dastard groaned.

"Your hand at my throat was not destined

to sweep me from your path," Vera went on. "Found half dead by Keen Kennard and Dagger Johnny, I am here to mete out that vengeance long delayed. You go back to Mormondom! If I say so, the pards of Red Eye—once your slaves—will be your escort."

The dark-faced, merciless looking men with one accord said sternly.

"We will!"

Reader, with your permission we pass by a period of ten days.

Deep in the shaded heart of the sierra a number of men headed by a woman on horseback are pressing southward.

In their midst rides a stalwart man, with bandaged eyes and scarred visage. Every now and then a curse and a groan breaks over his lips. Suddenly he raises one piercing cry and reels in the saddle.

A dozen hands are put out to catch him. He is lowered to the ground and the bandage taken off.

"This man is dying," says one of the men, glancing at the woman who is still young and beautiful. "He can never be taken to Utah."

"The rope, then!" says the woman, coolly.

In less than two minutes a rope has been produced and the noose drawn about the man's neck.

It is then thrown over a limb near by, and the other end is attached to the woman's saddle.

"This is the end of the greatest devil of the three!" she says, solemnly. "This is the doom of Dave Dastard, the hunted Mormon elder!"

The horse is spoken to and starts forward, the man held up by the dark-faced roughs of the sierra rises from the ground as the rope tightens. A moment later he swings in mid-air with the woman glaring at him from her saddle!

It is blood for blood, though not within the boundaries of Mormondom, and Dropshot Bluff, or Dave Dastard, is left for the vultures of the sierra.

"I doff my masks, all of them, forever," says the huntress. "I am now Edna Boynton once more."

Still another scene, six months later; but we will let an extract from one of the San Francisco papers tell it:—

"MURDER AND SUICIDE.

"Last evening, just after business hours, a woman wearing a black mask made her way unannounced into the private office of Messrs. Bowie and Belt, bankers, and after a few loud words, which were heard by several parties in the building, shot them both, and then, with the same weapon, sent a bullet through her own heart. The door of the private office was found to be locked when an entrance was attempted, and the woman's position showed that she had turned the key. The victims of this demoness were dead when found, and in the woman's bosom was a paper saying that she was Inez Hernandez, a Mexican woman who years ago frequented the gold camp owned by the bankers, then miners; that she had committed a petty crime, and that for it she had been branded by the camp proprietors. An examination of the dead woman's face disclosed the terrible truth of her statement. Across her forehead, in livid letters, was the word "THIEF," and on each cheek the large letter "T". The disfigurement was hideousness itself, not a trace of what at one time had been a beautiful face, remaining!

"The confession found on the woman stated that she had intended to ruin the two bankers by the assistance of gold in a manner not described, and then take their lives. To this end she had found a lost gold mine deep in the sierras, but others got a hold on it, and baffled this end. Then she came to San Francisco with the plan carried out last night.

"If her story be true, and there seems no reason to doubt it, for several old miners in the city recollect the branding, she took a terrible revenge for a terrible deed, and the killing of Colonel Bowie and Major Belt for a wild episode of mining life, stands at the head of San Francisco crimes."

Among the thousands who read this account of Queen Moro's vengeance was Keen Kennard the Shasta Shadow, who afterward discovered that Colonel Belt was Floss's uncle—which discovery told why Queen Moro hated the girl. The Shastan saw the masked face at last.

The men who held the gold mine against the masked huntress were the mutineer pards of Red Eye, and she had been forced to turn from them to finish her vengeance with the revolver.

To this day, despite its growth since then, San Francisco has not forgotten the doom of the bankers, and many of her citizens recollect the branded face of Queen Moro, and the shudder that passed over them while they viewed it.

Back from the sierras, Gilbert Golden settled down to peaceful life with the specter of insanity to haunt him no more, and with Floss Mogalle for his wife.

Keen Kennard, who, for once in his life, failed to carry out a vow, went back to the Shasta country, but a few months later he "pulled up stakes," went South, and soon afterward introduced Edna Boynton to Gilbert as Mrs. Kennard.

As for Dagger Johnny, he got a share of the long-lost Ophir, and where it yields its yellow riches to-day is found a new Red Eye, but its boss is not a hunted and desperate Mormon elder. Dagger Johnny fills that position.

THE END.

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